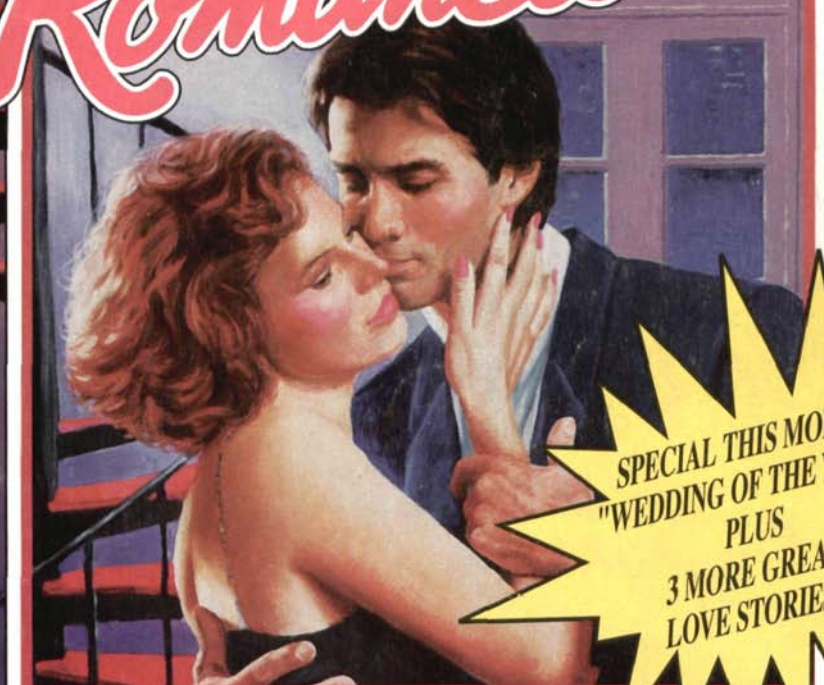


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Vol. 4 No. 6
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Romances



SPECIAL THIS MONTH
"WEDDING OF THE YEAR"
PLUS
3 MORE GREAT
LOVE STORIES!

Wedding of the Year
Compliments of the Groom
My Heart's Undoing
The Morning After

ELDA MINGER
KASEY MICHAELS
PHYLLIS HALLDORSON
DALLAS SCHULZE

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ELDA MINGER

became a writer via a circuitous route. Through the years, she has worked in several bookstores, cleaned houses in Beverly Hills, ushered in theaters, sung for her supper on Hollywood Boulevard and even appeared in two movies. A gypsy at heart, Elda has lived throughout the United States and Europe. She currently enjoys life in Palm Springs, California. When she's not writing, she's usually either gardening, dreaming, fooling around or at the movies.

KASEY MICHAELS,

the author of more than two dozen books, divides her creative time between Silhouette Romance and Regency novels. Married and the mother of four, Kasey's writing has garnered the Romance Writers of America Golden Medallion Award and the *Romantic Times* Best Regency Trophy.



DALLAS SCHULZE

is a full-time writer who lives in Southern California with her husband and Persian cat. An avid reader, she devours books by the boxful. To indulge her love of the American West, Dallas is a docent at a local museum dedicated to the period. In what little spare time she has, she enjoys doll collecting, old radio shows, classic and current movies, doll making, sewing, quilting and baking.

HARLEQUIN®
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Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

Weddings are such wonderful events, and a special favorite of mine! Whenever I join with family and friends to watch two people pledging their desire to go through life hand in hand, my thoughts turn to romance reading. And in this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, every adventure includes the chime of wedding bells!

Today, as I relax in the shade with a glass of ice tea, I'm ready to slip into this latest edition of the World's Best Romances where...an ice maiden meets her perfect mate when hired to cater his wedding to another...a groom left standing at the altar is consoled by a love that grew from a schoolgirl crush into the passion of a woman...a damsel in distress captures not only the attention but also the heart of a charming, handsome man...and one night of revelry leads to two strangers waking up next to each other in a Las Vegas hotel room only to discover they're married!

I'm sure you, too, will be entertained with each one of these special romance stories. Have a terrific summer!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

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ELDA MINGER

Wedding of the Year



While planning the society wedding of the year, Alex Michaels found the man of her dreams—Sean Lawton. Only problem was, Sean was the groom, and she'd been hired to cater his wedding!

The wedding of the year.

Alexandra Michaels stared out her office window. The Los Angeles sky was overcast, and a steady rain had been falling for the past hour. Yet nothing could dampen her elation.

Her intercom buzzed. "Alex? Your mother's on the line."

Almost nothing.

"I'll take it." There was a note of resignation in her voice.

"Alex? Darling, are you there?"

"I'm here." She was nervous already, hating the way her mother sometimes brought out the worst in her. The short, clipped voice. The defensive attitude.

"Alex, we just got back from London, and I wanted to let you know. How are you, darling?"

But Alex knew what that question really meant.

Is there an eligible man in your life?

"Fine, Mother. Just fine."

I'm not admitting to anything.

"Oh. Well, what have you been up to?"

"Work, work and more work. But I do have some good news. I've got the Bradford wedding. They took my bid. I have three months to pull it all together, but this is definitely the wedding of the year."

"Alex, that's marvelous!"

Oh, I get it. There might be a nice, eligible, rich young man at the wedding ceremony—

"Darling, I— That is something to be proud of."

But I'm well on my way to being terminally single.

"I know, Mother. How was London?"

Her mother chatted about her trip, Alex made soothing responses. Both agreed to call later in the week.

Then Alexandra Michaels, director of catering at the Los Angeles Biltmore Hotel, career woman *extraordinaire*, thirty-seven years old and celibate for the last fourteen months, hung up the phone and walked quietly into her private powder room.

Where she locked the door.

And burst into tears.

ONCE SHE arrived home, Alex got her evening off to a grand start by talking to the cat.

"So I never meet a man, spend the rest of my life catering other people's good times and live here with you, Roscoe. Is that so bad a life?"

Roscoe, a hefty tabby tom, barely looked up from the can of salmon Fancy Feast he was devouring.

"Just like my ex-husband. He only came home to eat and clean up before he was out chasing anything but me."

Alex didn't have to look up to know her housemate, Karin, was standing in the doorway. They had bought the stucco duplex together and got along famously.

But at least Karin had something that passed for a social life.

Karin was daring. Karin had Jesse, of the taut-muscle stomach and incredible shoulders. Of the dark, thick hair, Latin-lover eyes and full, sensual mouth.

Alex was not that daring. Alex had Roscoe, and though he had blazing yellow-green eyes and thick, tabby hair, he had a tendency to bring home fleas.

After dinner, the two women sat in the living room, glasses of wine in hand.

"So you've made it to the top, Alex. And so you're reassessing your goals. There's nothing unusual about that. I do it all the time with my painting."

"I guess I just feel like I've missed out on so much of life. It's like a horse wearing blinders, you know?"

"I do. I felt that way after my divorce. Jim always made fun of my painting, so I put it aside for a long time. When I finally got it back out, I felt all rusty and out of practice. It's the same thing with dating."

"Ugh. What a horrible word."

"I know. It's the pits. But I'm just about due for another party. Give me a weekend you'll be free, and I'll make everyone I invite bring an eligible guy. There's bound to be someone you hit it off with, even if you just go out for a while. You know, like training wheels on a bicycle."

"Yeah. You're right. I just get scared."

"Take it a step at a time."

Alex took another sip of her wine, then turned at the sound of a car coming down the street.

"I think Jesse's home."

"Hmm. I'm gonna run."

After her friend left, Alex sat quietly on the couch in the darkness, enjoying the view that encompassed the Hollywood sign, Griffith Park Observatory and then swept all the way downtown to the Wilshire district. At night, bright lights sparkling, you saw Los Angeles at her sultry, colorful best.

She didn't have time to enjoy it. She was rarely home. And when she was, she was usually asleep.

Enough. She leaned back into the comfort of the sofa and took another sip of white wine. *After the wedding, it's time for you to start living your life.*

"Yes, Mrs. Bradford, I understand you want a Renaissance theme." Alex had dealt with the Constance Bradfords of the world before. The women who sought her professional advice as a caterer smelled of money. Yet this had never intimidated Alex. She had grown up with money, then decided she wanted to make it on her own terms. An only child, she had always been independent.

"I want everything to be as authentic as possible." Constance's china blue eyes were regal and cool. "Now, did you check into getting the pheasants?"

"Yes. That's all taken care of. And I checked about costuming the waiters. The ice sculptures have been ordered. Now, about the flowers—"

"All white. And nothing ordinary. I don't want roses or carnations or—"

"I know just the man. He did the Jamison wedding last year, and everyone talked about those flowers for months—"

"Yes." Constance's eyes were admiring as she studied Alex. "That will do nicely. Only I want more flowers than that, masses of flowers—"

"David's your man."

As Constance checked over other details, Alex glanced covertly at the bride-to-be. Elizabeth "Muffy" Bradford, youngest child and only daughter of the Bradford dynasty. She was a pale little thing and looked nervous.

Who wouldn't be, with that mother of hers?

Bloodless. That was the word.

SEAN LAWTON gazed around the Bradfords' formal dining room with carefully concealed distaste. He had grown up with money and had made even more. He knew the sort of power it gave a person.

He felt Muffy looking at him before he turned and saw her frightened gaze. They were sitting next to each other, across from another couple Constance had invited to dinner. Sean kept his eyes on Muffy's wan face as he took her hand in his. Her fingers were cold.

Bloodless, he thought suddenly. Then, realizing it wasn't Muffy he was thinking of, he turned his attention to the woman at the end of the table.

Constance Bradford. Impeccably dressed in something blue and silk and simple. She was watching them, a slight smile on her perfectly glossed lips.

He smiled back, holding her eyes with his until it became a silent challenge. *Phillip, I feel sorry for you. You're going to have your hands full with that one.*

He hadn't really understood his best friend's decision, at first. When Phillip asked Sean to meet for a drink after work only a few weeks ago, he'd had no idea what his friend was up to.

"I love Muffy, and I don't know what to do about that mother of hers," Phillip confessed.

"Run off with Muffy," Sean had advised.

Phillip told him, "You don't understand. Muffy—God, Sean, I love her, but she doesn't seem capable of standing up to her mother. And Constance has made it quite clear that I'm not to come around again."

"The only reason that you're not seen as good enough for her precious Muffy," Sean said carefully, "is that you've declined going into the family business. Believe me, if that woman

knew you'd inherit all your father's money, she'd find a way to get rid of her own husband."

Phillip gazed morosely at his empty glass, then at Sean's, half full. Reaching for the bottle of Scotch, he tipped it toward Sean's glass, but was forestalled by his hand.

"I've had enough. I'll have to call Brian as it is and ask him to pick me up."

Phillip smiled, then refilled his own glass. "We've had some good times, haven't we, Sean?"

"That we have."

"Remember the time we were in that bar in— What was the name of that country?"

Sean smiled. "When that man threw his chair at me?"

Phillip laughed. "And all over that girl selling shells on the beach."

Sean nodded. "Couldn't have gotten out of that one if you hadn't thought as quickly as you did."

"Well, there's no way that sod would have attacked a priest."

"Father Lawton." Sean started to laugh.

"You've always been there for me, Sean." There was a peculiar intensity in Phillip's voice.

"As you've been for me."

Phillip swallowed a last mouthful of Scotch, then set down the empty glass. "I wonder if you could help me out one last time."

Sean eyed his friend. "Sounds serious."

"It is." Quickly Phillip outlined his plan. "All you have to do is stand in for me. Convince Constance that you want to marry Muffy and let her wallow round in all the wedding preparations. She likes you, Sean. I have no doubt she'd try to marry you herself if she thought the old man would stand for it."

"Not me," Sean grinned. "The money. She'd like to roll around in my money. God knows we've both seen enough of that type."

Phillip went on. "Then, at the last minute, when the minister is reading the final vows, I'll jump in from the side and, before the old witch knows what hit her, Muffy and I will be man and wife."

The idea had its own peculiar type of charm. Sean pictured her serene highness, the venerable Mrs. Constance Bradford, apoplectic with rage. He grinned.

"I'll do it. One last thing, though. Why me?"

Phillip leaned forward, a lock of tousled blond hair spilling over his high forehead. "I trust you. I love Muffy with my life, Sean. If this goes wrong, her mother will keep us apart for the rest of our lives. I think, even now, she may suspect something.

"I've watched her for years, seen what she's done—I know what she could do to Muffy. I love Muffy, and I want to spend the rest of my life making her happy."

Sean finished his drink. "You're a lucky man."

Phillip eyed his friend, then he grinned. "I'll be damned. And to think I bought that bull about living a life on the edge, never settling down."

"You keep my secret, I'll keep yours."

"You're a bigger romantic than I am! Good God, Sean, what's holding up your getting married?"

"If," Sean said slowly, "I could find a woman who wasn't so damned intent on my money and had some feeling strictly for me—"

"You'd marry her in a second!"

Sean nodded. "But, as I don't see that happening, I'll simply continue on my merry way."

"It happens, Sean. When you least expect it."

Muffy's fingers gently squeezing his brought Sean out of his thoughts.

"Mother wants to know about your latest deal."

Her voice was soft, almost child-like. Dressed in a strapless evening gown far too old for her, Muffy smiled up at him. And Sean had to admire her courage. Sheltered and bullied all her young life, this scheme required all the courage the fragile girl had.

Phillip was a lucky man.

The room seemed uncomfortably warm. Sean would stay just as long as he had to, then make a graceful exit. And on to the Biltmore.

Alexandra Michaels. The woman who was in charge of this "Wedding of the Year," as the press had dubbed it. He had to check her out, see if there were going to be any complications on that end.

And, of course, he'd have to keep Constance in a state of happy anticipation over the thought of getting her hands on his money.

They're all the same in the end. Every last one of them.

He could believe in luck for his friend. But not for himself. If there was a woman out there who wanted him and not his money, he had yet to find her.

"I'M LEAVING, Alex. See you tomorrow."

Alex glanced up at Marcy, her personal assistant. Sometimes she secretly envied the woman. Marcy, a petite redhead with amazing curly hair and a dancer's figure, had one of the most interesting lives in the office. Her job was nine-to-five, but her real life began when she left the office, always in a variety of stunning, stylish out-

fits. The last thing Alex had heard was that she had been at a friend's party and taken up with a Russian dancer who was in town on an extended tour.

Marcy always looked happy. Radiant. Fulfilled.

Everyone has someone but you.

Alex felt as vulnerable as a grade-school girl without a single valentine. The job, the house, the money and status—it wasn't enough. She stood and walked over to the window.

Arms crossed, Alex rubbed her palms up and down her upper arms. The office seemed cold. Probably the rain. The only light came from the lamp on her desk.

I wish... Oh, I wish...

"Miss Michaels?"

The deep, masculine voice caused a delicious little tremor. Alex turned and saw a tall silhouette in her doorway.

"Alexandra Michaels?" That voice again.

"Yes? Can I help you with anything?"

She wasn't afraid. There were still plenty of people on the floor, and this man didn't inspire fear, but something much more elusive. Alex swallowed, then walked slowly toward her desk and the light.

He advanced at the same time, and it seemed to Alex, as the light caught his face, that he was the most handsome man she had seen in years. Thick, dark hair shot with the slightest silver strands. Blue-gray, penetrating eyes. Strong jaw, broad shoulders, a solid body. She'd bet there wasn't any fat beneath that Armani suit.

He was simply devastating.

"I wanted—" He stopped speaking and simply looked at her. Alex couldn't seem to glance away. Her heart was starting to race, but blood seemed to be thrumming throughout her body. Alex quickly sat down at her

desk. She felt the need to put something, *anything*, between her and this man. She motioned him to a chair.

He sat down, then leaned forward. Alex looked up and found he was studying her again. Her mind was going into overdrive. Could one's libido hyperventilate?

Enjoy this, a lively little voice in the back of her mind was whispering. *There's something delicious going on here.*

"So, what is it exactly that you want?" She knew her cheeks were slightly flushed, her eyes dancing. He was fabulous.

He hesitated for just an instant, then said quietly, "I wanted to discuss the Bradford wedding."

She picked up a change in the air, but didn't look away.

"What exactly did you want to discuss?"

He seemed angry suddenly, but not with her. There was a sense of pent-up frustration, of something beyond his control.

"Is everything going smoothly?" Now his voice was soft, his gaze back on her.

Alex met his gaze head on. "Yes, it is. Everything's right on schedule."

"Is Constance giving you a hard time?"

Alex felt her eyes narrow, then made her expression smooth and unreadable. Was this one of Constance's little henchmen trying to catch her unaware? She rejected the thought immediately. This man danced to no one's tune but his own.

"No. She knows what she wants, and it's my business to give it to her."

"And Muffy? How is she holding up?"

"I have to believe she's getting what she wants, as well."

His eyes were full of admiration, and Alex had the strangest feeling that what they were saying had not the slightest relation to what was going on.

Her mind started to wander, with visions of the two of them alone, the door locked, the backs of her thighs pressed up against the hard wood of her desk as he slid his hands up beneath her skirt, bent her back and—

She snapped her mind back to the present.

“Was there anything else—” She stopped and cleared her throat. It was tight, all of a sudden. “Mr.—”

Was it her imagination, or were his eyes regretful?

“Sean. Sean Lawton.”

“Mr. Lawton. Was there anything—”

She stopped. Frozen. Staring at him.

Fate was playing one of her nastier practical jokes.

“Alexandra—”

“Don’t.” Her instincts were screaming at her.

“We have to talk—”

“No, we don’t.” Her voice was resolutely bright.

“And if I say you’re wrong—”

“Not!” Alex stood up. She grabbed for her suit jacket, shrugged it on, then snatched up her purse. Backing away from her desk, she walked swiftly to the door.

“Alexandra—” He was on his feet now.

The way he said her name made it sound like a caress.

She didn’t turn around until the elevator door closed.

Sean Lawton had walked into her office and exploded all of her preconceptions about love—*lust*, she corrected herself—at first sight.

And she was arranging his wedding.

“ALEX? I need your signature on these.”

Alex glanced at the memos, scanned them quickly, then picked up a pen and began to sign them.

“Have you seen him yet?” Marcy was always on top of the hottest office gossip.

“Who?”

“Who else? Sean Lawton. I think he looks like that guy who played James Bond in—”

“Timothy Dalton.”

“Yeah. With a little bit of Sean Connery thrown in.”

“It’s the dark hair and light eyes. It’s a striking combination, but it doesn’t do much for me—”

“Ms. Michaels?”

That voice. She was doomed.

Alex glanced up, praying that Sean Lawton hadn’t heard what she’d said. She and Marcy stared as he walked in and sat down in one of the leather chairs by her desk. His dark suit fit him perfectly. He leaned forward, that same intent look she’d remembered last night in his eyes.

Marcy snapped out of her trance. “Would you like some, ah, coffee? We have tea, too. Or juice? I could get some fresh Danish—”

“Coffee would be fine.” Sean smiled at Marcy, and she scooted out. Alex sighed, then turned to face him. The day she’d been assigned the Bradford wedding, she’d gone over the cast of characters. Constance the bulldozer. Muffy the mouse. John Bradford, brilliant businessman.

And Sean. In his early forties, he had more money than he’d ever spend. Slowly, he was redesigning the Los Angeles skyline. Lawton Towers. Lawton Place. Every time you picked

up the paper, he was in either the society pages or the business section. He had a lineup of beautiful female escorts, but Alex had never seen a picture of him with Muffy.

Maybe it had been a quick romance. Passionate.

Muffy, passionate?

Now he was simply staring at Alex. Sizing her up. Making her nervous.

"Mr. Lawton, unless you have something you'd like to say, I suggest—"

She never finished her sentence, for Pierre came charging in, a tray in his hands.

"Alex, my darling, you have to taste this! It's my idea for the cake. Most wedding cake is—dry. Tasteless. This, *this* little cake will become the talk of the catering world."

Alex had to smile. She loved passion in her co-workers, and Pierre was passionate about his cooking. A tall, rangy man with sandy blond curls and twinkling blue eyes, he was the consummate temperamental Frenchman. But everyone adored him.

Pierre set the tray down. There was a large slice of chocolate cake on a delicate china plate, and a silver fork.

"Tell me the truth," he said quietly. Then, as if noticing Sean for the first time, "Alex, she always tells me the truth. There are not many people with that quality, don't you agree?"

Sean nodded as Alex tried the cake.

It melted in her mouth. Rich, dark chocolate. Raspberries. And something else. That was what set Pierre's cooking apart.

"It's wonderful."

Pierre smiled, then kissed his fingers. "For you, Alex." He turned to Sean. "She's the best. Always working. I asked her to come to Palm Springs with me this weekend. Even the hardest workers need a vacation

now and then, don't you agree, Mr.—"

"Lawton. But call me Sean."

Pierre's eyes widened.

"Why don't you try the cake, Mr. Lawton? After all, it is your wedding." Alex was pleased with herself, her tone purely professional.

"Cut me a piece," he replied.

Pierre seemed fascinated as Alex took the same fork she'd used and sliced through the delicate cake. She leaned forward, starting as Sean grasped her wrist and guided the fork to his mouth.

His touch was warm. Firm. Assured.

"Wonderful, Pierre. I think it will be a wedding the guests will never forget." He was still holding her wrist, and Alex gently but firmly pulled her hand away. Pierre regarded them with an amused expression.

"So, *ma coeur*, I will add that cake to the menu."

"Yes. As long as Mr. Lawton has approved it, I doubt if Mrs. Bradford will challenge the decision."

Taking one last look at the two of them, Pierre left the office.

"Now, Mr. Lawton—"

"I've got the coffee." Marcy appeared in the doorway, balancing a huge tray, complete with a bowl of fresh fruit and assorted baked treats.

Alex picked up the silver coffeepot and poured Sean a cup, then passed it to him.

"Danish?" she asked.

"Maybe the blueberry one."

She handed it to him with a napkin, then poured herself a cup of coffee.

Now, perhaps he would tell her why he was here.

But he simply sat there, quietly eating his Danish and drinking his coffee.

What is this, some kind of game to annoy me?

"What is it that you want to talk about, Mr. Lawton?"

"Sean. Please."

"Sean." She took another sip of her coffee.

"I did some checking on you last night," he began.

She could feel herself starting to bristle.

"I was curious, Alexandra—"

"Alex. Call me Alex."

"Alex it is. Don't be offended at what I did."

"I'm just curious as to why."

"I have my reasons. There are a few things I'd like you to do for me."

Alex took another sip of coffee. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like you to help me give three parties before the wedding. I have a great many people to entertain. I'd thought of catering the parties out of my home, but it would be so much more convenient to have them here."

She thought about what would happen if she accepted. More contact with Sean. Seeing him with Muffy. Having to fight this ridiculous attraction.

She glanced at the clock on her desk. "My next appointment is in twenty minutes. Why don't you give me a brief outline of what you'd like?"

Fifteen minutes later, Sean stood. Alex followed his lead and tried not to let him see how his handshake affected her. He was almost out the door when an oversight occurred to her.

"Sean! How do I reach you if I need to talk to you?"

His smile was slow. "I've made it easy for you, Alex. You just have to buzz me. I'll be staying in the Presidential Suite until the day of the wedding."

The Presidential Suite. The top two floors of this hotel. He's going to be around constantly.

And, having dropped that little bomb, Sean Lawton slowly sauntered out the door.

"ALEX? Are you all right?"

Marcy's concerned voice made Alex glance away from the window. Marcy, purse in hand, was ready to leave for the day.

"I'm fine. So where are you going tonight?"

"Where else? The ballet." She fiddled with the strap on her purse, then said, "Look, Alex, that guy—I mean, *Peter* doesn't even affect me that way! And everyone in the office was swooning. And then, when we heard that he's going to be *living* here—"

"I'm sure it's just so that he can be right on top of things." *Literally*. "If we can pull off this Renaissance extravaganza, we'll be way ahead of the other hotels."

Marcy stared at her, then said, "Louise was right."

Alex was all attention now. Louise Hartson was one of the caterers who worked under her direction. And she wasn't one of Alex's favorite people. There was a streak of maliciousness in her when she wasn't looking for attention or basking in reflected glory. Alex was constantly picking up the pieces of her catering projects, and just last week had seriously considered firing the woman.

Louise was the consummate California beach girl, getting a little older but still holding up well. Her tan was perfect, her streaked hair artful.

And if Louise thought there was anything going on between Alex and Sean Lawton, it would be a total, unmitigated disaster.

"Right about what?"

Marcy looked miserable. "Oh, Alex, I don't want you to think that all I do out there is sit and gossip—"

"I know that's not true. Now tell me what she said."

"She said—she said it was true what everyone had suspected all along, that you had ice water for blood if Sean Lawton couldn't get a rise out of you."

Alex smiled. If she had Louise fooled, she had the entire office fooled. Now for Mr. Lawton himself.

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Don't be. You can't control what comes out of that woman's mouth. If I let Louise upset me, I'd be a candidate for early retirement. The woman's a pest, nothing more or less."

"She's not doing well with the Farrell wedding."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Marcy smiled. "Thanks, Alex. See you tomorrow."

Once she was alone, Alex sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. *Ice water for blood*. Louise had never made this personal an attack. And saying it in front of Marcy when she knew it would get back to Alex... Louise had to know how close she'd come to getting fired, and resented it.

But if Alex had fired her last week, it would have meant taking on three more weddings and a bat mitzvah on top of the Bradford Renaissance Faire. It would have been impossible.

If Louise can only hang in for a couple of months...

"ALEX? Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and glanced toward the door. Sean stood there, looking concerned. He wore faded jeans and a black pullover.

"I'm fine." She reached for her purse, averting her eyes.

"You look tired."

"It's been a long day. You know all about those."

"Have dinner with me."

She had to admire him; he was direct. "I'm having dinner with some friends."

"Tomorrow night."

If he wanted a challenge, he'd get one. "Sean, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're engaged to be married, and I just happen to be putting together that wedding. I know men generally get nervous before the big day and perhaps contemplate having a few flings. But I'm nobody's fling. Got it?"

She could be as direct as he could. Now she was surprised to see him smile.

"Was what I said so amusing?"

"No. No, Alex, your feelings are dead on."

She was astonished. "So, I've made myself perfectly clear?"

He nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving her face. Alex felt as if she had issued him a challenge and he had taken it.

"I'm nobody's fool—and nobody's conquest."

He shut the door and walked slowly into her office.

"So, what do you suggest we do?" he said softly.

She stared up at him. "About what?"

"About this. Between us."

"This... feeling?" She felt horribly self-conscious.

"Yes."

Suddenly she felt unbearably tired. A part of her ached at the thought of giving up. She longed to throw caution to the wind and not think of Muffy or the wedding or her mother or her job or anything that got in the way of her primitive reaction to this man.

So easy. No one would ever have to know. A few hours, the privacy of a suite, the key turned securely in the lock. A chance to find out what would happen with this man who seemed to ignite her deepest sensuality. This type of feeling came along...what, once in a lifetime?

Lust. Pure and simple. Alex wasn't proud of her thoughts, but they were her true thoughts, and she wouldn't push them out of the way.

"It's nothing that can last," she began carefully. "I mean, you must love Muffy. What's happening between us—I'd label it lust. It's not designed to hold two people together, you know that."

"I disagree," he said quietly. "I think lust has been the driving force that's kept us from total extinction. I think that when a man wants a woman the way I want you, he goes a little crazy and doesn't think about the repercussions. And that feeling, more than anything, has kept mankind alive. I think it's what keeps people together today even when life throws them a curve. And I think feelings that strong don't happen every day, and when they do, they shouldn't be ignored."

He thought like no other man she ever knew, and his logic was giving her a headache. Her fingers clenched into frustrated fists. "What do you want me to do? Surrender to something that can only last a few months, when you'll go off and start building a life for yourself with another woman? No thanks. I'd rather be alone. In fact, it's the reason I *have* been alone for over a ye—"

She stopped, then locked gazes with Sean once again.

"Don't do this to me. I'm not some deal. I'm not a building you can buy and renovate and then cast aside."

"What if I said we could have more than that?"

She could feel the anger starting to bubble inside. "More than what? You mean I could be your little something on the side? I don't think so, Mr. Lawton."

"Sean. Have you thought, Alex, what we'd be like together? Alone? Have you?"

"I won't deny it. But what you think and what you do—"

"I've always believed in following my instincts."

"Bully for you."

"I'll never hurt you, Alex."

"There's nothing but hurt for me in this."

"Trust me."

"*Trust you!* I don't even trust the way I feel about you. And it's lust."

He hadn't touched her, but his eyes were so alive, Alex couldn't tear her gaze away from him.

"You make it sound like something distasteful."

"It frightens me. I don't want to feel this way, Sean."

"Do you think I do? If I could have met you at another time, another place—"

"But you didn't."

"Alex." He grasped one of her wrists and pulled her closer. "Alex, don't run away from me. If I told you there was a way we could work things out—"

"There isn't. Let me go."

"I can't."

And she knew it was true. She was up against him now, and her other hand shot out, fingers splayed against his chest. His heartbeat was rapid. She could feel it through the fine wool of his sweater.

His arm was around her waist, pulling her up against him. And all she could think of was getting closer to this

man, touching him, feeling the warmth of his body. A rush of pure, primal feeling overwhelmed her, and she closed her eyes.

She felt his hands in her hair, then he was caressing her head, tilting her face up—

She was lost. Now she could feel the solid wood of her desk against the back of her thighs, and he was pressed against her, close enough to make her realize he was as excited as she was.

"Sean?" She didn't recognize her own voice.

A heartbeat later, his mouth covered hers.

He was kissing her as if he were a starving man and she was responding, her hands sliding up into his hair, pulling his face down to hers, arching up against him. And it was more than fourteen months of being alone, more than the desire to be close to someone. It felt right. His hands felt as if they had been made to shape her body, his mouth felt right against hers.

She didn't even protest as his hand slid swiftly up to cup her breast. His mouth caught her sharp whimper, then she bit his lip as a pleasure so brilliant it was painful shot through her body.

Just touching her breast wasn't enough. She felt his impatience as he flicked the buttons of her silk blouse open, then slipped his hand inside. His fingers were warm as they slid over her lacy bra, then moved to the front clasp and did away with the last barrier. When his hand caressed her bare breast, Alex moaned and knew she was lost.

He was kissing her neck now, moving down her throat, and she sensed a raw, wonderfully male impatience. Had she known this was going to happen, was it why she'd fantasized it? Her head went back, her fingers dug

into his shoulders for support as he gently bit the taut skin of her neck.

Don't stop, don't stop—

"Alex?"

She recognized the voice and pulled herself back to reality with a jolt. Alex barely had time to notice Sean blocking her view of the door. All she could see was Louise's face over his shoulder as she stood in the doorway.

But that was enough. Her blue eyes were incredulous, then a slow, feline smile spread over her face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were—occupied with a client. I'll talk with you in the morning."

She closed the door softly, but Alex kept staring at it. Her body felt numb. Finally, not trusting herself to look at Sean, she fastened her bra and began on the buttons of her blouse.

"Alex."

She was startled to find he looked as shaken as she felt.

"Alex, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. What happened was just as much my—responsibility," she finished tiredly.

What a bland word to describe what had flashed between them.

"Alex, I didn't come here with the intention of—"

"I know that. It's all right." She was reaching for her suit jacket, then her purse.

"Alex, we have to—"

"Talk. I know. But I can't—" Her voice wavered. "I can't tonight. I need to get away from you. Just for a little bit. Just so I can—figure out what I'm going to do."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, then?"

She nodded, too tired to resist.

He stepped closer and gently kissed her forehead.

That kiss was her total undoing. When the door shut behind him, she burst into tears.

SEAN LAWTON stood in one corner of the Biltmore's luxurious Presidential Suite and stared out at the downtown L.A. skyline. The sun was just beginning to come up. Another day. And seventy-eight days until the wedding, when he could come clean with Alex, explain the entire mess and find out if there could be anything more between them than this incredible attraction.

He'd thought of calling Phillip. Sean was positive he could trust Alex with the truth—that he was merely acting as a stand-in. But he couldn't reach Phillip.

The trouble with this entire scheme was that he hadn't anticipated meeting Alexandra Michaels.

He wanted to believe she was different, and her background seemed to prove she was. He'd had her checked out, and what he'd learned had pleased him immensely.

The only child of James Edward Michaels, Alex had turned her back on her family fortune after graduating from a Swiss boarding school. She'd taken some college classes, and had worked part-time at the Marriott down by LAX. While employed there as a cocktail waitress and later a bartender, she'd fallen into the world of hotel management.

She'd eventually finished her degree—in psychology, with a business minor—then slowly worked her way up the corporate ladder. Now she was well on her way to making a name for herself in L.A. And Alex was not a woman to whom money was a false god.

He watched the sun climb higher and thought about ordering up a pot of coffee.

Find Phillip. Far easier said than done. Phillip had worked in computers for many years. The money was excellent, and it had given him financial independence from his little tyrant of a father. He had chosen to work one more job before the wedding, but there were strings attached.

The company that he worked for, Stealthco, was putting in a bid to design the software for the Stealth bomber. Phillip had flown to Virginia days after their talk. Now he was holed up at one of the company's private homes. No one would be let out until the bidding commenced. That way, it was impossible for information to be leaked.

Phillip had told Sean that bidding commenced three days before the wedding. In the meantime, he would be in a forced seclusion. The job had seemed a good thing at first. Even if Phillip had been tempted to see Muffy, he wouldn't have been able to.

Tell Muffy. Sean rejected that idea. The girl was as nervous as an overbred poodle. Constance had done a neat piece of psychological work on her daughter, turning her into a pale shadow of what she might have been. He couldn't do it to her.

Phillip and Muffy were counting on him. Their happiness was in his hands. He couldn't put that in jeopardy.

Alexandra. She was beautiful, but it wasn't only her beauty that had attracted him. Though that had hit him at first, she had seemed so vulnerable when he first saw her in the office that day. She chose her words carefully, with a self-protective hesitancy that had gone straight to his heart.

Her eyes. Intelligent and dark, hiding secrets. Hiding passion. She'd come alive in his arms, then frosted over into the coolly efficient Ms. Mi-

chaels, director of catering. An enigma.

Suddenly restless and eager for the day to begin, he punched out the phone number for room service. Then he started for the shower.

A plan was already beginning to form in his mind.

"HAVE DINNER with me tonight, Alex," Sean had said.

"No, I don't think so," she had replied uncertainly.

She waited for Sean to come to her office the entire day, but at six-fifteen when he didn't show, Alex finally had to admit to herself she just might have blown it.

"Anything else, Alex?" Marcy said over the intercom.

"Just bring me in the menu for the Bradford wedding. I want to look it over one more time."

A few minutes after Marcy left, Alex sighed and sat back in her chair. Then, knowing she was alone on the floor, she gave in to the impulse, unpinned her hair, kicked off her heels and swung her aching feet up on her desk.

Sean walked silently down the corridor, his footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. He carried a large shopping bag, and he started to grin as he rounded the corner and saw the light from Alex's door. It was partially open, and he peeked inside.

His heart melted.

Alex was sitting in her chair, her feet up, fast asleep.

He studied her face for several minutes, then remembering he had hot food in the bag, he set to work creating dinner for her.

Not wanting to wake her, Sean looked around her office. There was a small table just outside the door that would be perfect. . . .

SHE WAS dreaming that she had died and gone to heaven. It was like one long, continuous party, only all the food was good. The smells were . . .

In that strange state between sleeping and waking, Alex slowly opened one eye.

Sean was lighting two candles on a small, round table covered with a peach-colored cloth that looked suspiciously like one from Pierre's restaurant.

She moved in the chair, and it creaked. Sean looked back over his shoulder, and their eyes met.

What was he doing here? Alex slowly lowered her legs off the desk.

"You wouldn't go out to dinner with me, so I decided to bring dinner to you."

Something about his persistence was immensely gratifying. She got up and walked toward the small, intimate setting.

He smiled, then pulled her chair out for her. She sat down. Her nap had refreshed her, and she felt competent to deal with whatever he threw her way.

She just wanted to spend a little more time with him. See what was beneath that beautiful masculine exterior. Talk to him.

"That's not food I'm familiar with," she said softly. "Do you cook?"

"I didn't cook this," he said. "It's from the Seventh Street Bistro."

"Oh." He was clever, and she was impressed. She knew the restaurant; Pierre knew the chef. She had eaten there once and remembered the food as exquisite. The Bistro had a reputation for the classiest takeout in town.

"I wasn't sure what you liked, so I ordered a little of everything. Potatoes with Sevruga caviar and lemon cream, salmon tartar with ginger and green peppercorns—"

"I like all that so far—"

"Cold poached salmon with herb dressing and goat cheese, mahimahi with spices, broccoli ravioli in a butter-lobster sauce—"

"Oh, my God—"

"And last but not least, venison with a peach-and-apple chutney in a black peppercorn sauce. Is there anything you don't like?"

She started to laugh. "No. I can be a real pig."

There was silence as they both did justice to the food. Sean had brought china plates, silverware, linen napkins, two tall white candles in silver candlesticks and a centerpiece of tiger lilies.

Alex couldn't remember enjoying a dinner more.

"Why a catering career?" he asked.

"Why not?" She laughed, then reached for her wineglass. "I was working at a bookstore for minimum wage. A friend of mine was making terrific money as a cocktail waitress down at the Marriott. She told me there was an opening, so I took it. Then I figured out that the bartender made even more money, and when she gave two weeks' notice, I asked her to give me some on-the-job training.

"After I convinced my boss that I could bartend, I did so for a year and a half, then moved on to another hotel. By the time I took a job here, I was one step away from the director of catering. Five years later, I had the job."

She took another sip of wine, then said, "So now you have to tell me. Why construction? What is it that caught you?"

"I like making deals." He leaned back in his chair, studying her. "Sometimes it isn't even the building. It's the challenge of getting something of quality and turning it into something even better."

"Pretty ruthless."

"I can be—when I want something badly enough."

"This ravioli is incredible."

"You're very good at changing the subject, Alex. But I want you to know that making you uncomfortable was never my intention. I just want to get to know you. I wish we could have met at a different time. But I'm not going to hurt you. I give you my word."

"I wish we'd met at a different time, too," she whispered. "You're not like any man I've ever met."

That seemed to please him.

"What does marriage mean to you, Sean?" she asked quietly.

"Forever. Loyalty and courage. Standing by that person's side and facing life together. Wanting to be with that person more than anyone in the world."

"Muffy's a lucky girl."

"Yes, she is," he said quietly. Then, he seemed to check himself, as if he didn't want to say any more.

They ate in silence for a while, then, "Do you think," Alex began carefully, "that a man and a woman can be good friends?"

"No."

"That's kind of sexist."

"It's the truth."

"Could we be—"

"The way I feel about you, no."

"Then why are we having dinner together? Is this a game?" She could feel herself getting upset.

He glanced away from her, frustration evident in every muscle of his face.

"God, Alex, if I told you the truth, I wouldn't even believe it."

"Are you in love with her?" The words were out before she had time to check them, but she had to know.

His tone was subdued when he answered, "No."

"Yet you're going to marry her. Does Muffy know?"

"No—and you're not to tell her anything. It would only upset her."

"Don't you think it will upset her to find out you don't love her?"

"I *do* love her. As a friend. But not the way—a man loves the woman he commits himself to."

"Do you love anyone but yourself?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

The meaning of his words took a minute to sink in, and then she was staring at him. "Me?"

He nodded.

"You love me?"

"It's different for a man."

"I guess so!"

"I can't explain it. I just looked at you and I knew. And I don't believe in wasting time."

Dessert consisted of two pieces of Pierre's incredible chocolate torte. Alex recognized one of his waiters after he thoughtfully knocked and walked in, then cleared away their dishes and served dessert.

After he had left them alone, Alex leaned back in her chair and picked up her wineglass.

"The tablecloth, the flowers—it's from Pierre, isn't it?"

"A very accommodating man, your Pierre. He understands that sometimes our hearts take us places and we have no choice but to follow."

She set her glass down. "I'm really trying to understand this, Sean. What do you want from me?"

"Just this." And he leaned forward, all power and intensity.

He's making another deal. Only it's not a building, it's me.

"All I want," he said slowly, "is a promise to see me until the wedding and not go out with any other man."

Dead silence reigned until Alex said, "What's in it for me?"

"The beginning of the best time both of us will ever have."

She smiled. "Can I give you some conditions?"

"We'll see."

"No sex. I'm deadly serious about that one, Sean."

"I agree. Anything else?"

"I don't want to hurt Muffy."

"I'm in total agreement with you there."

"So," she said, "you've been honest with me, so I'll be honest with you."

"I'd appreciate it."

"I am totally out of my depth with you."

"Will you trust me on this one, Alex? It would mean... everything to me."

You, Alex, are certifiably insane to agree to this little arrangement. But agree she did.

And she couldn't even blame the wine.

YOU, SEAN, are certifiably insane to agree to this little arrangement. No sex? What are you, crazy?

Now that he had agreed to keep their relationship platonic, Sean found he could think of nothing else. Yet he knew he couldn't take advantage of Alex that way, not when she thought he was going to marry Muffy.

And Phillip was still in seclusion. Why couldn't his friend have taken on a less complicated job, like doubling for Arnold Schwarzenegger? Why did Phillip have to be in hiding somewhere on the East Coast, unable to come to the phone?

Now Sean Lawton, media darling, was consigned to a hell of his own making. He'd faced some of the most

powerful men in the city over the bargaining tables, and he had almost always won.

But one woman was going to bring him to his knees.

*

"SEAN, this arrangement could be professional suicide for me." Alex kept her voice low as she spoke on the phone. She'd thought a great deal about what he had proposed. She also knew Pierre wouldn't have sent up just anyone to clear that table and deliver dessert. She could trust Pierre to be discreet.

"I'm not asking you to do anything that will compromise you in anyone's eyes. I'm simply asking you to spend some extra time with me before the wedding."

"But...Sean, that first night, when Louise walked into my office. I'm worried about what she might do."

"Has she done anything to you before?"

"No. But I've called her on neglecting some of the finer points of two weddings and an anniversary party. She was pretty nasty about it. To be honest, I've been thinking about firing her."

He said, "I blocked her view, so I don't think she saw anything. But if you'd like, I'll think of a way to fix it."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Point her out to me when I'm in your office this afternoon. Sometimes a second opinion helps."

As it turned out, Louise came into Alex's office while Sean was there.

They were going over the fine points of Sean's first party, a bachelor affair, when she came in.

"Well, well, Alex, working late again?" Her tone was suggestive.

She obviously hadn't seen Sean whose back was to her, hidden in the depths of a large, buttery-soft chair in front of Alex's desk.

"Who are you?" he asked quietly, turning to fix his gaze on Louise, who was clearly startled.

"This is Louise Hartson. She's one of the assistant catering managers."

"Why were you surprised to see Ms. Michaels working late?" Sean said. "Surely you don't think she became head of the catering department without a lot of long nights."

Louise looked befuddled, but there was a belligerent gleam in her eyes.

"Oh, come off it! You know who her father is. She could buy this hotel if she wanted to."

Alex felt herself start to freeze up inside.

"I'd watch myself if I were you," Sean warned. "You might find yourself looking for another job."

"Not with what I saw the other night. I could call either the *Times* or the *Herald*. I'm sure they'd pounce on that juicy little item for their gossip column."

Alex felt sick, but kept her face impassive and said nothing. She had a feeling Louise didn't stand a chance.

"What are you talking about?"

"When I walked in that night, she was in your arms."

"Yes, she was. What of it?"

Alex had no idea where this conversation was going.

"You'd been kissing her."

"Had I?"

"Well, she was in your arms—"

"Ms. Michaels has been known to go a long time between meals, has she not?"

Louise was looking down at the floor. "Yes."

Alex knew it was common knowledge that she sometimes worked

straight through lunch and even dinner.

"We'd finished our meeting, and she had agreed to see to the first of three private parties for me. What you saw, Ms. Hartson, was what happened after Ms. Michaels walked around her desk to see me to her door. She started to feel faint, so I steadied her. Afterward, she was feeling so poorly that she spent the night in a room in this hotel and ordered up dinner. You can check that with the kitchen records. Now, if this ridiculous accusation is quite finished, I'd like to get back to work. Is that all right with you, Ms Michaels?"

"Yes." Alex turned to Louise and said, "I'd like to see you in my office tomorrow at ten."

"So you can fire me?" Her belligerence was back.

"No. I've arranged meetings with all the catering assistants, so don't feel that I'm singling you out."

After Louise left the room, Sean said quietly, "You're going to have trouble with that one. I'd fire her and cut your losses."

"I can't. There's no way we can cover for her. We've all got our hands full. But after the new year, I'll let her go."

He wasn't pleased by this, she could tell. And it suddenly touched her that he was concerned for her, wanted to protect her. It had been a long time since she had had someone to watch over her.

"ALEXANDRA, I want you to know that I feel my daughter is in very capable hands. Everything looks splendid. Now, Sean tells me he's giving a party tomorrow night, one of those bachelor things. Are you taking care of that, as well?"

Constance seemed almost human today, but Muffy looked worse than ever. Pale and listless, she and her mother had been having a tense spat when Alex walked in. It was because Muffy was losing weight and her wedding dress had already been made. It was a creation fit for a fairy princess, designed out of the finest European lace, being shipped in straight from Belgium. Three seamstresses were also flying in for the wedding and would sew Muffy into the dress for her big day, to ensure a perfect fit.

"Why don't I call Pierre and see if he can send you up something to eat?" Alex suggested. Muffy truly did not look well, and looking at her, Alex was beginning to feel a horrible sense of guilt.

"The flowers," Constance was saying. "You're sure this man will do the job? If the flowers aren't perfect, then the whole ceremony is ruined."

"David's incredibly creative. He'll be here the day before the wedding to arrange everything."

"And Pierre is making a new cake, you've given me a copy of the menu—" Constance ticked off each item with a relentless organizational ability that Alex, despite her dislike of the woman, had to admire.

BUT NOTHING could have prepared her for the disaster awaiting her the following evening.

"Alex, we're in trouble. Tony's in the hospital. They think it's diverticulitis."

"Oh, no. Is he all right?"

"Meg said they caught it in time. He's at Cedars right now."

"This is not happening to me," Alex said. "Marcy, what's the name of that school for bartenders?"

"American Bartending School."

"What's the name of that guy who runs it?"

"Jerry. He's great."

"Call him up. We need a bartender."

Moments later Marcy buzzed her back.

"They're closed. His office closed at five. Maybe Pierre knows someone, one of the bartenders from the restaurant."

"But Tony's special. He's really, really good. He does all those little things that make a difference."

There was a pause, then Marcy came back with, "Why don't you do it, Alex?"

"I—no. I couldn't."

"Why not? You bartended for a long time. And I bet you were really good."

"Well—" Alex could feel herself starting to relent. "I don't even think I have a tuxedo shirt left."

"Hang on, I'll be right in."

Marcy came into her office toting a large canvas bag.

"I was going out with Peter to this club in Hollywood tonight, and I had this look all planned, but I can wear something else. We're close enough in size—you'll look just great!"

"What are you talking about?" Alex was beginning to panic.

"A dandy. Remember Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*? It was a great look. Now, here's the shirt...."

EVEN ALEX had to admit she looked great.

The black dinner jacket, trimmed in rhinestones, fit with shoulders pads added. The icy white, ruffled tuxedo shirt was a bit tight, tucked into a pair of black trousers with a satin ribbon down each outside leg. But the ulti-

mate touch was the large, plushy fur coat—fake, Marcy assured her.

"I don't like the shirt. It pulls across your boobs."

Alex glanced down. Marcy was right.

"Don't wear the shirt."

"Marcy, I don't know—"

"Trust me, Alex, I know clothes. Just button the jacket and you won't even need it."

When Marcy was done with her, Alex studied herself in the mirror. She looked incredible. Like no bartender she'd ever seen. What made the outfit incredibly sexy was the subtraction of the shirt.

But it worked. And with the party starting at eight, and no other bartender in sight, what was she supposed to do? She was certain Sean wasn't going to be happy about this, but if she had learned one lesson in her years of catering, it was that the show must go on.

Marcy, insisting Alex needed something around her neck, had fastened a black velvet ribbon with a sparkling rhinestone pin, then a stickpin on the lapel of the jacket. "Insurance, in case someone gets drunk and tries to get a little fresh, you know?"

Marcy then braided Alex's hair back with the silver ribbon she'd planned to wear as a headband.

"Now, go do your makeup. Light face, dark eyes and lips." As Alex did her face, Marcy drilled her on the drinks.

"What's in a Tequila Sunrise?"

"Tequila, orange juice, grenadine. And a cherry."

"A Sunset?"

"Blackberry brandy instead of the grenadine."

"I'm impressed. What about a California Driver?"

"Vodka, orange juice and grapefruit juice."

Marcy was still whispering drinks to her as Sean walked in the large double doors of the Emerald Room.

"A Russian Quaalude."

"Stoli's, Kahlua, Bailey's and Frangelico."

"You got it, Alex. Good luck."

And with that, Marcy smiled and stepped back slightly.

"You look great. Kill 'em."

Unless someone kills me first. Marcy was out the door, and Sean was walking straight toward Alex. She could tell that he was not at all pleased to see that she was going to be attending his bachelor bash.

"What are you doing behind the bar?"

"Tony—the bartender I had hired for tonight—is in the hospital. Diverticulitis. I couldn't get anyone else on such short notice, so I decided I'd do it."

"There isn't anyone else in this entire hotel who could bartend tonight?"

"There's no one else who's as good as Tony." Or me, she added silently, her chin lifting just a fraction. "After all, you didn't request a giant cake, so I know there won't be any naked girls running around. And studies show that men just love a female bartender."

He sighed deeply, fingers raking his thick, dark hair. "I know, Alex, I just don't think you should do this."

Realization came so suddenly that she was surprised she hadn't sensed what was really going on. *He's jealous. He asked me not to see any other men, and now, if I tend bar, I'll be in the middle of a ballroom full of them. How wonderful.*

Jealousy, like lust, was something that had been in short supply in her life. Until Sean. It struck her that she

was intensely, fiercely glad that he wasn't a man to do anything halfway.

And there was no way he could deflect the number of men he had invited. The possibilities were endless.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Sure."

"Let Pierre send someone up."

"All right, I'll just go powder my nose."

There was a phone in the bathroom, and Alex dialed Pierre's extension.

"Pierre? Send Carl."

"Chérie, you are a cruel woman."

"He's jealous."

"Of what? You, in your little tuxedo without a blouse, among all those men? How silly of him."

"Is Marcy there with you?"

"She's eating one of my truffles right now."

"Tell her thanks."

"With pleasure, *ma coeur*. Carl is on the way."

Carl was a blue-eyed blonde, his surfer good looks barely restrained in a tuxedo. Alex guessed that Pierre must have given him particular instructions as to this job.

"Hey, dude, let's party."

Alex saw the tiniest bit of worry in Sean's eyes and had to bite her inner lip hard to keep from laughing.

"Are you familiar with most standard drinks?"

"Sure. Whiskey and water, Scotch and soda—"

Carl, Alex decided, was priceless.

Sean said quietly, "Make me a Melon Ball."

Carl went straight for the rum.

"Vodka, Carl," Alex whispered, just loud enough for Sean to hear.

"Oh, yeah. My mind just blanked out, you know what I mean? Okay, vodka, and then orange juice, right?"

Alex nodded her head, looking pleased.

Carl set the highball glass up on the spill rail.

"Where's the Midori?" Sean asked quietly.

"Right here." Carl hefted the liqueur bottle, tossed it, caught it, and quickly poured a scant half ounce in the glass. Just enough to fill it to the brim.

He caught Sean's disapproval.

"Oh. Sorry. Here, I'll just dump some of it out—"

"Not on the fresh ice, Carl! Here, over on the side."

"Whoa, what was I thinking? Call me another one, man."

"Let's see you do a gin and tonic."

"Nice well you got here, dude. I'm impressed."

"Where's the lime?"

"Oh, yeah! A garnish, of course."

"Make me a Ramos Fizz," Sean said. His jaw was beginning to tighten. Alex glanced at her watch. Thirteen minutes till showtime.

Carl, bless his heart, looked at Sean blankly. "You're kidding me, man. That's a drink?"

"A Ramos Fizz," Sean said slowly.

Carl turned to Alex. "Help me out on this one?"

She stepped behind the bar and placed a wineglass with some ice cubes in it on the speed rail. Then she threw ice, gin, cream, sweet-and-sour mix and a few dashes of orange-flower water into the blender.

She separated an egg and threw the white into the blending cup. Then, while the drink was blending, she dumped the ice out of the wineglass, strained the contents into it and topped it off with some soda.

The silence was deafening.

"Well," said Alex, after a short pause, "I'm sure there's some paperwork waiting for me somewhere." As she started to leave the room, she heard

Carl telling Sean about the last party he had bartended.

"Alex, wait."

"Yes?"

He strode quickly up beside her. "Carl's not going to work. Is there anyone else?"

As if on cue, a tall, blond man entered the room.

"Sean Lawton! You sure sprung a quick one on all of us! I didn't even know you were seeing Muffy!"

Alex walked over to the bar and smiled at Carl.

"You're wasting your time at the Biltmore, Carl. Have you ever considered going into acting?"

He grinned. "I'm taking acting classes on the side. And my agent is trying to get me a part on a soap."

Only in L.A. "Well, you did a great job here. Now get going before he changes his mind."

"I'm history, Alex."

Within seconds, Sean was back at the bar. Three other men had walked in, and a group of them were talking and laughing by the door.

"Where did Carl go?"

"Sean, he couldn't handle a party like this. Do you think I want that kind of news to get back to my boss?"

He frowned. "All right. You can tend bar, until Pierre sends up someone to replace you. And—damn it, Alex, what happened to your shirt?"

"What shirt?"

The muscles in his jaw tensed again. "What exactly do you have on underneath that jacket?"

"Besides a black lace camisole? Nothing."

The look in his blue-gray eyes was everything she had hoped for—and more.

"Alex, we have to—"

"Hey, pretty lady. How about a rum and Coke?"

"Hey, Sean, only the best for your buddies, right?"

The look in his eyes . . .

She'd forgotten just how entertaining bartending could be.

"Darling, make me a Tanqueray and tonic."

"A vodka martini, and could I have two olives, sweetheart?"

"Honey, I'd like a Climax."

The look in Sean's eyes was murderous.

"Would you like me to make that a Screaming Climax?"

"Alex, could I speak to you for a minute?" There was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Wait a minute, Sean." The man was from Texas, judging from his accent and the languorous way he moved. "She really is a bartender! Now, honey, what was that last one? It sounded *mighty* interesting."

"A Screaming Climax. You just add vodka."

"Alex—"

The Texan threw back his head and laughed uproariously, then said, "Toss that vodka right in. You make me feel reckless, little lady."

Sean was about to say something when another wave of guests descended on the bar. Alex knew, with a feeling of certainty, that she would pay for this mischief sooner or later.

"SEAN, you can't just spend all your time here at the bar. Parties are for mingling, and you're the host."

"They all end up coming to the bar sooner or later. I can talk to them here as well as I can out there."

She hid her smile as she reached for a lime. She cut more garnishes in silence, then said softly, "I think the party's going really well, Sean. What do you think?"

"I think you're quite a bartender." His tone wasn't grudging. There was respect in his voice.

"Thank you. I try my best."

"Alex, I—"

"Sean, there you are! Get over here. Carter and I haven't seen you all evening. Though I can see why you'd want to hang out at the bar." The man looked like a Ralph Lauren model.

This time, Sean couldn't avoid his guest. With some reluctance, he left the bar. He didn't like her being here, the lone woman in a group of handsome, successful men. Now, as she thought of his wedding—of having to watch Muffy Bradford walk up the aisle—Alex began to reconsider the allowances she'd been making for Sean.

Who did he think he was, telling her not to pay attention to other men? And when would she have a chance like this again?

I'm not a building, Sean Lawton. You can't make one of your deals with me.

"Hi, babe." The man standing at the bar looked like a young Nick Nolte, all blond hair and muscles, with the bluest eyes. Very attractive.

"Hi, yourself. What can I get you?"

"Behind that bar, you mean?"

"Mmm...yeah." She could see Sean out of the corner of her eye, and she could feel his presence.

It was volatile.

"How about a shot of tequila?" said Nick, as she thought of him.

"Good choice. I like a man who likes tequila." A corny line, but it *always* worked.

"You do?"

He *was* cute. He didn't stir her up the way Sean did, but maybe this was what she needed. Someone to show Sean that she wasn't just waiting for him to walk in so that she could jump up, roll over, play dead.

Be daring, a sneaky little voice whispered in her ear.

He's going to be furious, the voice of reason shot back. *You may get more than you bargained for...*

"So, you doing anything after the party?"

An electric silence. She could *feel* Sean, sense that he was within ear-shot, that he would hear her reply.

"How about a quiet dinner at Bernard's? I'd like to get to know you...someplace we could really talk."

"I'd really like that."

"I'll go make reservations. Think you'll be off in about an hour and a half?"

"I know I will."

"All right." He was giving her an assessing look.

She met his gaze, then smiled slowly. "You have excellent taste—"

"Steven. But everyone calls me Steve."

"Steve. I'm Alex. Bernard's is a very romantic place."

"I hope so." There was a devilish glint in his blue eyes as he turned and walked toward the main door.

She reached for another lime, as she wanted something, anything, to do with her hands so she wouldn't have to meet Sean's eyes.

There was a palpable chill in the air.

"You're not going out with him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We made a deal. Don't do this, Alex."

"Tell me why you think you have any rights at all when it comes to what I will and will not do."

"I won't let you do this."

"What are you planning on doing, dragging me out of this room forcibly? Locking me up?" She met his gaze, and it was frigid. "This is the twentieth century, Sean, not the fourteenth. Women aren't possessions

anymore, even when they do choose to get married. Are you planning on treating Muffy this way? Does she know what you have in store for her?"

There was a perverse little demon riding her. She'd believed she could handle this whole thing, but the thought of Sean with another woman was more than she could bear.

But just then, three men descended on the bar.

"Darling, how about a refill—"

"A Tequila Sunrise—"

"Just Perrier, with a twist—"

Alex immersed herself in the drinks, chatting, laughing, smiling. Sean, looking like he wanted to upend the entire bar, stalked away.

"WONDERFUL party, wasn't it?" Alex said brightly as she surveyed the empty Emerald Room. She and Sean were the only people left, and she had five minutes to make it to Bernard's. She'd unbraided her hair, and it cascaded down her back in shining waves. With the thick, plushy fur coat around her, she was dressy enough for the four-star restaurant.

Sean simply looked at her. "Don't do this, Alex."

Oh, Sean, it's for my own protection. You scare me.

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Well," he said, "at least let me help you with your coat."

The tiny, secret part of her woman's heart was upset that he wasn't going to put up more of a struggle.

"All right."

He walked behind her, holding the coat, and at the same time she moved her arms behind her.

Too late, she realized he'd trapped her.

The coat, voluminous and fluffy, came down over her head in a smooth

swish, as she felt strong arms lift her up, then thump her over hard shoulder bone.

The lurch left her body in a painful rush.

"Put me down, you rat! Right now! Down!"

In answer, she felt a large hand come stinging down on her buttocks, and she was shocked speechless.

He was walking swiftly now, and she began to struggle. Her heart was pounding, but her mouth was dry, and she couldn't form the words to tell the world that she was in the hands of a madman.

By the time she did, it was too late.

They were in the elevator now, and frustrated tears filled Alex's eyes as she realized it was the private elevator that went directly to the Presidential Suite.

Temporary lair of one Sean Lawton.

HE SET HER down on the bed with a resounding thump.

Alex had heard the key scrape in the lock, and as she struggled up out of the fluffy black fur, she saw Sean slip the key into his pocket.

"You," she said slowly, with as much dignity as she could muster, "are a pig."

He said nothing, simply looked at her.

"I'm getting out of here and going downstairs to Bernard's."

"Just try it."

Furious, Alex jumped to her feet. "Give me that key."

"Are you going to go out with Steve?"

"That ... is ... none ... of ... your ... business!"

"No." His jaw was set, the blue eyes cold now.

"This is not the fourteenth century—"

"You were the one who gave me the idea."

She could remember her taunting words.

"What are you planing on doing, locking me up?"

Me and my big mouth.

"I really, really hate you."

"I really don't care. Take off your jacket."

"What!"

"Just a little insurance. There's no way you'll call anyone for help if you're up here in your underwear. Now take off your jacket. Or I'll do it for you."

"Sean, you can't be—"

"I want to see that black camisole. I've been thinking about it all night."

Me and my great, big stupid mouth.

"What if I said," she began nervously, "that I would forget this entire incident and go straight home?"

"Too late. Off. Now."

She stared at him.

He took a step toward her.

Her hands flew to the rhinestone stickpin, her fingers fumbling as she began to unfasten it.

He leaned back against the wall by the bed, hands in his pockets, a slow, arrogant smile on his face.

She unbuttoned the first button of Marcy's black jacket.

"Sean, I really think we need to—"

"Come on."

The second button was unfastened, and her mouth went dry at the thought of Sean seeing her in her underwear. It was extremely nice—a black silk, lace-trimmed camisole and tap pants—but it was still underwear. And he was still the most devastating man she'd ever met.

Now the jacket was completely unbuttoned.

"Sean, I cannot believe that a civilized man—"

"I'm tired of being civilized. Take it off."

Their eyes locked and held, the only sound the ticking of a clock somewhere in the penthouse. Finally, after what seemed endless minutes, she looked away.

He knows.

Somewhere, somehow, her fury was turning to the strongest feeling of arousal she'd ever experienced.

Hadn't she thought about this? Fantasized about being alone with him?

So easy. No one would ever have to know. A few hours, the privacy of a suite, the key turned securely in the lock...

"Off, Alex. Now."

She released her jacket, shrugged out of it and let it slip off her shoulders to fall at her feet.

"Now the slacks."

They joined the jacket on the floor and, suddenly embarrassed, she swept her hair over her shoulders so that she might have some sort of covering.

"Push your hair back over your shoulders."

She looked up at him, fighting against the temptation to beg. She would never do that.

"Come here."

Swallowing hard, she walked over to stand in front of him. She knew he was looking at her silk-clad body, and she resisted the urge to look up into his face until the desire to do so was too compelling.

The look in his eyes destroyed her.

If eyes could worship, his were doing so. Feeling strangely empowered, she whispered, "Is it—am I like you imagined?"

"Better."

His arms came around her, warm and hard, and he pulled her up against him. His body was incredibly warm through the silk, and she moved closer to that warmth and sighed, tension leaving her body.

They stood that way for a long time, Sean simply holding her, until he kissed her.

She felt like tinder catching fire as the kiss deepened. His lips were warm and firm, leading, coaxing, caressing. Then demanding. And she wanted him in a way she had wanted no other man in her life.

Then he held her away from him, the movement so smooth and steady it took her a moment to realize the kiss had been broken.

He held her for several minutes, and she could feel his heart racing. Alex gently placed her palm against his chest, and he caught her fingers, then kissed her palm.

"Let's get in bed."

Her body tensed, and he was quick to reassure her. "Nothing's going to happen, Alex. I give you my word. I just want to keep you close for a while."

She could have pointed out to him that Steve had probably left Bernard's by now, that she was too emotionally exhausted even to contemplate seeing another man, let alone carry on a coherent conversation. But the truth was, she wanted to be close to this man for a time, away from prying eyes and the need to conceal what she truly felt for him.

She could admit it to herself, but not to him. Not yet. If she did, she felt as if she would be totally vulnerable. She'd keep this new knowledge of the way she felt about Sean to herself just a little longer.

He lifted her so easily, with a masculine grace that made it seem he had

held her in his arms this way many times before. She was frightened for an instant, and her fingers curled around the strength in his shoulders, needing his support. As Sean walked toward the bed, Alex softly rested her cheek against his.

There was such tenderness in this man, as well as stubbornness and pride.

He sat her down on the big bed, then pulled back the covers and helped her in. When he tucked the sheet and quilted bedspread around her carefully, Alex felt as if she was infinitely precious to him.

"Are you hungry? Did you eat dinner?"

She shook her head.

"Do you want something from room service?"

She shook her head again. Everything that had transpired tonight had exhausted her.

Linking her fingers around his neck, she gently pulled his head down to hers.

"Can we sleep? Just a little bit?"

"Anything you want."

She closed her eyes as she heard him slipping off his clothes, and a flare of painful excitement slipped through her. Then she heard the bedside lamp click off, and he was beside her, so close...

It took her a few seconds to realize he wasn't going to touch her, and she was thankful.

Alex reached out in the darkness until she found his hand. She grasped it firmly, linked fingers with him, then with a sigh, she turned her flushed face against the cool cotton of the pillowcase and slept.

WHEN SHE woke, she saw him standing by the window, staring out at the dark skyline. He wore only pajama

bottoms, his feet bare. She watched him, enjoying the sight of him during such a private moment.

"Sean?" Her voice was quiet in the silent room.

He straightened, and came to sit next to her on the bed.

"Do you feel better?"

"Much better."

"Alex, I'm not proud of what I did this evening, and I'm not going to try and make any excuses—"

She linked her hand with his, then placed a kiss on the back of his hand.

"Don't apologize. You didn't hurt me."

He looked at her for a long moment, then he said, "Hungry?"

"Yes."

"We'll order up."

They moved one of the tables right next to a large window, and called down to room service. Over dinner, they talked very carefully, skirting the more painful issues.

But later, back in bed with chocolate-covered strawberries and a bottle of champagne, Alex finally spoke from her heart.

"I can't go through with it, Sean. I can't watch you marry another woman. I'm not as sophisticated as you think."

He took another sip of champagne, watching her.

"If I asked you to trust me again, could you do it?"

"I want to. But I'm confused. Why are you taking part in this marriage if you don't love her?"

When he spoke, Alex knew he was weighing his words carefully.

"Alex, if I told you it had everything to do with loyalty and nothing to do with love, and that once the wedding is over, nothing will stand in our way, would you believe me?"

Slowly, so slowly, she nodded her head. "I would."

He looked up at the ceiling then, and she could see the small muscle working in his jaw. She touched his face, and his eyes were instantly riveted to hers.

"I don't deserve you," he said quietly. "I don't know what the hell I did to have you walk into my life, but I thank the gods every day that you did. And I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

He turned off the light, and they lay in the big bed together, watching the first rays of dawn start to streak the night sky.

"Are you crying?" he asked suddenly. "Alex, darling, don't cry. We'll be fine." He kissed her then, his lips warm and reassuring against her cheek.

"I'm so happy." The words were muffled against his neck. "I'm just so happy."

"YEAH, I've fixed her. Oh, no, nothing that simple. I'll tell you over dinner. Let's go to that new place out on the pier."

Marcy froze, hearing the genuine malice in Louise's tone. They were both working late, but she was sure Louise had no idea Marcy could hear this conversation. She'd picked up the wrong extension, and now didn't dare set down the receiver for fear of discovery.

"Little Miss Rich Bitch thinks the rules just don't apply to her," Louise continued. "Well, I know exactly how to nail her. She picks on me, Randy, puts me down all the time. And in front of the others. I don't deserve treatment like this."

Marcy grimaced. Alex, pick on Louise? It was the exact opposite. Alex

had bent over backward for her, and now Louise was going to stick it to her.

Not if I can help it.

"No, I don't want to talk about it over the phone. But let me tell you—" there was a hint of laughter in her voice —"Constance Bradford is going to crucify her when my little bomb drops."

Marcy froze, barely breathing. When Louise finally hung up, she set the receiver down.

The Bradford wedding. She's going to try to destroy Alex's career.

But how? And why? Grabbing her purse, Marcy slipped out the glass doors and ran silently down the hall.

"WELL, I'M JUST glad you and Uncle Charlie got home safely." Alex had been worried about her aunt and uncle flying to Europe. Any time she watched the news, it seemed someone was sabotaging some flight.

Colleen swam smoothly to the side of the pool, then grasped the steel ladder and climbed out.

"I'm glad you could come over for a morning swim. Are we still on for Thanksgiving?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Where are your parents going?"

"They'll be in New York on business."

"I wish James would slow down."

"Try telling him. Mother does all the time."

They ate out on the patio, melon and eggs Benedict. Colleen had an excellent cook, who usually prepared diet dishes. But when company came over, she liked to go all out.

"That hollandaise is as good as anything at the Biltmore," Alex admitted.

"You didn't eat much of it."

"Nervous stomach, I guess..."

Alex could see that her aunt was dying to know more, but even though she was growing more certain of Sean's feelings for her, it was still too strange to put into words. She didn't need any more pressure at the moment.

"I understand." Colleen patted her hand. "When Charlie and I first found each other, I didn't want to talk about it, either. It was too special."

"Thank you, Colleen."

"Be happy, darling, it's all over much too quickly."

"MARCY? Alex."

"What's up?"

"I'm not feeling too well, Marcy. Do you think you could cancel that four o'clock with Mrs. Weaver? Then I could leave before three."

"It's as good as done."

Alex cradled her head in her hands. All those late nights and careless meals had caught up with her. There was a strain of the flu going around the office, and she was just about sure she had it.

She left the office promptly at three and drove straight home. She fed Roscoe so he'd leave her alone, then crawled into bed and decided to sweat it out.

"CATERING OFFICES, can I help you?" Marcy took the call.

"Is Alex there?"

"She's sick, Sean. She went home at three."

"What's wrong? Is it serious?"

"Just a case of the current crud going around the office. She'll probably be back in a few days." Then Marcy said softly, "I bet you'd like her home address, right?"

"You got it."

"Your brother better be cute."

"I think you'll like him."

HE WAS AT Alex's house in record time, with chicken soup from a deli, a fresh loaf of bread and everything helpful he could think of from the pharmacy.

But he hadn't counted on a blond bombshell opening the door.

"Does Alex live here?"

"The other side of the house. I'm Karin."

"Sean."

The brilliant blue eyes narrowed. "Aren't you the guy who's marrying Muffy Bradford?"

"One and the same."

"And you're bringing Alex chicken soup in bed— Forget it, it's none of my business. But mess around with my buddy's head, and I'll break both your legs."

He smiled. "I'll take that into consideration."

"Good. Just so you know." She closed the door.

There was no answer at the other door.

"I've got a spare key if you want it."

Sean glanced around at Karin. "Why would you help me out?"

"I guess," she said, grinning, "because I really do believe in blowing out your valves once in a while."

ALEX HAD BEEN dreaming, strange, unpleasant dreams, as she tossed and turned in bed.

When she saw Sean at the door of her bedroom, she thought she was hallucinating.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take care of you. Marcy told me you weren't feeling well."

"What's that?" She indicated the tray he held.

"Chicken soup and toast. Nature's perfect food. Do you feel like eating?"

"I'm not nauseous. I just feel horrible."

"Stressed out. I'm not surprised. Why don't you try to eat a little, and then I'll give you an alcohol rub."

Alex knew she was ill when not a single sensual thought flashed into her brain.

After the back rub, he carried her downstairs and, wrapped in a blanket and deep in the cushions of a sofa, Alex had to admit she felt a lot better.

"HELLO, MARCY, could I speak to Alex, please?"

"She went home, Colleen. She didn't feel well."

"I thought she looked a little funny this morning. I'll drive out there and see if she needs anything."

"But—Sean's already there," Marcy said slowly, to a buzzing phone. She returned her attention to a list she had compiled.

It was a master list of everything related to the Bradford wedding. If Louise was trying to sabotage it, she must have contacted someone who was providing a major service. Pierre had confirmed that the food preparations were coming along nicely. The next thing she'd done was call the costume agency and reconfirm the order on almost a hundred costumes.

Now, looking at the long list, she wished she had the nerve to throttle Louise and stick burning bamboo shoots beneath those perfectly manicured nails.

But that would let her know she was on to her.

Sighing, Marcy picked up the phone.

SEAN WAS sitting on the sofa opposite Alex, watching her sleep, when he heard the bell ring.

When he answered the back door, the woman stepped briskly inside.

"I'm Alex's aunt, Colleen Michaels."

"Sean Lawton. I'm... a friend of your niece's."

"How is she?"

"Sleeping. I think it's just exhausting."

"I would say so. She has had a lot on her mind."

There was no condemnation in the statement, yet Sean had the strangest feeling she knew exactly what was going on.

"I've already got coffee made."

"How resourceful. I like that in a man."

They sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee and talking. In the middle of their fourth cup apiece, the phone rang.

"Sean? Marcy. I have some paperwork Alex will want to see, so I'll drop it by. Will you be there?"

"Yes. I'm not going to leave her alone."

He missed Colleen's small, satisfied smile.

"I need to talk to you about something."

The serious tone in her voice disturbed him. "Of course. I'll be here, and I'll do whatever I can."

Back at the table, he picked up his coffee.

"Something upsetting?"

"Something's wrong. Marcy's dropping some paperwork by, but it's just an excuse to come over."

"Perhaps something to do with your wedding?"

Now he could sense her studying his face.

"It wouldn't surprise me." He kept his voice perfectly flat, then changed the subject.

Twenty minutes later, Colleen rose, took her coffee cup to the sink and rinsed it out. "I don't think she's going to wake up soon. The best thing is for her to get as much sleep as possible. I feel she's in very good hands, so I'll leave her with you."

Sean walked her to the back door.

Colleen didn't mince words. "I hope that whatever happens, Sean, you won't end up hurting her."

"That was never my intention."

"I'm not quite sure if I understand what's going on here, but I'm getting very good feelings about the two of you."

"Thank you."

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

He thought of the probable dinner at the Bradfords'... and Constance.

"I haven't made any plans yet."

"You're welcome at our house, if you'd like to spend the day with Alex."

He smiled. "Am I that transparent? I'd love to."

"So I DON'T KNOW where she's messed things up, but she has. I've called almost halfway down this list, and everything is still on schedule. It gets me crazy."

"Why aren't you doing Louise's job? You're a lot more competent than she is."

Sean knew he'd hit a nerve when Marcy dropped her gaze to the table and whispered, "I don't know."

"Have you asked Alex?"

"Asked Alex what?"

Sean turned toward the sound of her voice. Alex was leaning in the doorway, wrapped in a turquoise-and-purple paisley silk robe with silk tassels. Her long hair was loose and she looked much better, her face less exhausted, her eyes clearer.

Sean helped her into one of the kitchen chairs, then touched her forehead gently.

"Not as hot as before. Do you want some juice? I brought orange and apple."

"Apple, please." But Alex was not to be deterred. "Asked me what?"

Marcy cleared her throat. "Alex, it's just that I've always wanted a chance to do some catering work. And I know I could! I've watched you and Phil and Lisa, even Louise. I couldn't be as bad as she is. So, do you think I might be able to—do something?"

Alex's expression was incredulous. "You never said a word about wanting to cater, Marcy."

"I just didn't think I could do it."

"Why not? Don't you think I know who was responsible for that Higgins wedding? It wasn't Louise."

"You knew? She used me until I got smart and stopped doing her work for her."

"Well," said Sean, setting down a glass of apple juice, "you can take over Louise's job once she's fired."

Alex sighed. "I can't fire her. There's too much work."

"Give Marcy the job. Louise isn't doing her work, anyway. And she's trying to destroy your own."

"What are you talking about?"

Sean glanced at Marcy. "She has to know. Alex may be able to figure out just what it is Louise is up to."

Marcy filled her in on the conversation she'd overheard. "She's thrown a wrench into the works somewhere, but I can't seem to find it."

"Give me the list," Alex said quietly.

They were all silent as she scanned it. On the third time through, she found what she was looking for.

"The flowers."

"How do you know?" Sean said.

"I'm sure it's the flowers. Constance Bradford could forgive everything else, but she wants flowers that will outshine the Jamison wedding. And you can't get flowers *that* special anywhere else but David's. All Louise had to do was call him up and cancel the order, implying that his flowers weren't good enough and we were going elsewhere. He's good—I think he's the best—but he's temperamental, and he doesn't always check things through. And he'd be too proud to call and scream at me. He'd just never do business with me again."

"So what are we doing to do?" Marcy asked.

"Tomorrow morning, the three of us will go to his store."

"And if the flowers have been canceled?" Sean asked.

"Louise is history."

ALEX PUSHED open her office door and spoke quietly to Marcy.

"Send Louise in."

Her stomach was in knots. This was possibly the worst part of her job, but it had to be done. And her lingering fury gave her strength.

David Russell had been furious with her. The one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollar flower order had been canceled, with the implication that his arrangements for the Jamison wedding had been "not quite good enough" for the Bradfords. When Alex had swept into his store that morning, he'd started screaming.

After his outburst, she hadn't minced words. She told him exactly what had happened, then soothed his artist's ego and made sure the flowers were reordered.

Now Louise was going to get exactly what she deserved.

"Hi, Alex, you wanted something?"

"Louise. Sit down." The woman was incredible. She didn't even flinch.

"Louise, I spoke with David Russell today, and it seems that the order for the Bradford flowers was canceled. Do you know anything about it?"

Blue eyes opened wide, but Alex didn't miss the slight trembling of her hands.

"No. Should I?"

With those three words, Louise sealed her fate.

"I know you do, Louise. Clear out your desk and be out of here within the hour. Don't ever ask me for a reference. I don't think I could stomach it."

The blue eyes narrowed. "You think you're so—"

Marcy, with perfect timing, opened the door. "Alex, Sean is here to see you. Are you busy with anything?"

"Nothing important," she said, looking straight at Louise. "I don't want to see you again before you leave."

Louise opened her mouth, seemed to think better of it, then swiftly left the office. She barely spared Sean a glance.

"So, you told her?"

"She lied. I didn't expect her to admit to it. But I'm glad she's gone." She looked up into his face. "And I'm glad you're here."

TIME PASSED with amazing swiftness as the Bradford wedding drew closer and closer. The days grew shorter, and Alex's evenings grew longer as her workload continued to increase. She didn't want to look too far into the future—beyond the wedding of the year.

She simply immersed herself in her work and enjoyed the time she had with Sean.

And slowly, ever so slowly, Alex began to believe that events were unfolding the way they were for a reason, and she gave up trying to control her life.

It was so much more fun just living it.

*

"WONDERFUL TURKEY, Pierre."

"You outdid yourself with the stuffing."

"Ah, wait until you see what I have for dessert!"

There were unanimous groans around the table when Pierre presented three different desserts: a pumpkin chiffon pie, a killer pecan pie and a white-chocolate mousse in a pool of raspberry sauce.

Later, after everyone had eaten too much and the cook had cleared away, Charlie lit a fire in the large den and broke out a bottle of brandy.

"And what shall we drink to?" Colleen said.

"To love," Charlie said, blue eyes twinkling. "To our many happy years together, darling, and to many more."

"And to friends and family," Pierre added.

"And good food," Alex chimed in, looking at Pierre. She had her back to Sean and didn't dare look at him. She wanted to toast to love, but doubts were beginning to assail her again. Sean had fit in so perfectly with her aunt and uncle and Pierre, the people she loved best in the world. She almost felt as if she couldn't get her hopes up too much, for fear of being hurt.

"And love," Sean said, his eyes on Alex's gleaming mane of hair, burnished by the firelight.

"And love," Charlie said, taking it all in.

LATER, WHILE ALEX took a short walk with Colleen, and Pierre began to pack up his cooking equipment, Sean found himself alone in the den with Charlie.

"I think," Charlie said quietly, "that we'd better talk about Alex."

"All right," Sean said.

"You love her, but you're going to marry Muffy Bradford on the twentieth of December."

"Yes."

"What about your relationship with my niece?"

"I'm not going to hurt her, Charlie."

"You're hurting her now," Charlie said quietly. "Every time she looks at you and thinks she has no future with you. Are you scared of backing out of the wedding?"

"No, sir, that's not it at all."

"I want you to know that if I had merely heard of what was going on, I would have never invited you here today. But Alexandra has such a high regard for you, and Colleen claims she's trusting her instincts. They're impeccable, but I don't want to see my niece hurt."

"I understand."

"I doubt that you do. I think you need to know a little bit more about Alex than you do. Would you care to listen?"

Sean nodded.

"I'm very different from my brother James. I married Colleen because I fell in love with her. I still love her. James married Meredith because it was time to get married. He needed a wife."

"Alexandra was born less than a year later. Meredith had a relatively easy birth, but children had not been part of what James saw in his future. He saw Meredith as his, the woman who would accompany him on business trips, attend parties with him, entertain beautifully and ease his way up

the ladder of success. There was no room for a child in that scenario.

"Apparently they hadn't talked about children. I have no doubts that Meredith wanted Alex, but she was young, and James is an extremely persuasive man. He talked her into leaving Alex with Colleen and me when she was six weeks old so they could go to London on business."

Sean leaned forward ever so slightly.

"I accepted this arrangement, because Colleen and I had wanted children, but we weren't having any success. My wife is an extremely giving woman, and I thought this time with Alex would be beneficial to her. She had so much love to give and nowhere for it to go.

"And Alex was an easy baby to love. The problem was, James's business trips became more frequent. Meredith was in the position of having to choose between her husband and her daughter. As I said, she was very young. She chose James."

"What happened to Alex?"

"We raised her. But it was a painful childhood, knowing her father and mother were in the same city and had so little time for her. Today, Alex rarely sees her father. The choices he made when she was a child partly motivated her to make it on her own.

"As Alex grew older, my brother started to have affairs with various women. Meredith had nothing at this point, except the security that James would never divorce her. She tried to bring Alex back into her life and only succeeded in confusing her. She wanted her, but then she sent her away. And I think Alex grew up with a sense of never having been good enough."

Sean knew what Charlie was about to say.

"I don't ever," Charlie said quietly, "want anyone else to give her that feeling of not being good enough."

"MUFFY'S NOT feeling well. Bridal nerves, I suspect."

"I'd be nervous, too, if I was marrying Sean Lawton!"

There were polite female titters around the table. Constance had invited over thirty people for a quiet little sit-down dinner, but she was displeased by her daughter's behavior. Muffy had come down with the flu and was upstairs in her bedroom. Constance, who would have preferred to have shown her daughter off, was highly displeased.

John Bradford, down at the other end of the long dining room table, was studying his wife. Something wasn't right about this engagement and wedding. Sean and Muffy. The first time he'd seen them together, he'd thought they looked like a protective older brother with his delicate little sister. Perhaps that was what Muffy wanted—and he had felt old and tired that day, as well, realizing he'd abdicated the role of father in so many ways.

Maybe it was just too late.

He glanced up, watching Constance at the other end of the table. The chandelier gleamed softly above, the wallpaper was rich and opulent, a soft peach color. Silver clinked against china, and the crystal sparkled.

"Constance? I'm going to check on Muffy."

"I'm sure she's all right, dear. She's probably sleeping."

He felt a flash of rage. "I'll go up just the same."

John walked slowly up the huge staircase, then down the long hall to his daughter's bedroom door.

As he was about to knock, he heard the first sob. It was a small, stifled sound, and it tore at his heart.

He stood in the hallway, staring at the door.

Muffy had been an extremely private child, and she hadn't changed. If he walked in on her now, it would be embarrassing for her. Almost painful.

Confused, he stepped silently away from the door.

MUFFY TRIED to stop the next sob by holding her hand over her mouth, but it exploded out on her. She turned her head into the pillow and began to cry.

Where was Phillip when she needed him? She had to talk to him now.

Her hand strayed downward, until it rested protectively over her stomach. She'd first suspected when she'd been so tired in the mornings. Then the nausea. Thank God her mother rarely came into her room, for there was no way of explaining this to her without Constance becoming enraged. All of her plans would be spoiled, all her desires thwarted, if she knew her perfect daughter was almost three months pregnant with Phillip's baby.

Muffy's eyes filled with tears again. So frightened, so terribly scared, and there was absolutely no one she could confide in. No one she wanted to tell.

Except Phillip.

"WHAT DO YOU mean I can't leave tomorrow! I have to be in Los Angeles the evening of the seventeenth!" Phillip faced three of the security guards in their gray suit pants, white shirts and navy blazers.

"It's orders. Colonel Brimley has to open the bidding, and he's snowed in up in New Hampshire."

"Look," Phillip said quietly. "You cannot keep me here against my will. I'm leaving."

"Phil, be reasonable. We're miles from the nearest pay phone. This location was chosen because of its isolation. You couldn't make it to the airport in time if you started walking right now."

"All right. All right." All he could think about was Muffy. "There has to be a suitable compromise."

"There isn't one. There's only this. You can't leave this farmhouse until the bidding commences, and it won't start unless Brimley gets to Washington."

There was no way out. The sky had been slate gray and ominous earlier this evening, and now a heavy rain was falling. You could barely see outside the windows. The news had predicted sleet later on, and possibly snow.

He was trapped.

"When do they think Brimley will make it down?" he asked. *If Muffy cracks, if Constance finds out...*

"Things are looking good for the next day or so. You won't be that late."

"ALEX, THAT'S ONE sharp dress."

"Thanks, Marcy."

It was a classic dress. A black chemise style, it had a low-cut back filled in with sheer black lace. The skirt came to the middle of her knees. With sheer black hose and black heels, it was an extremely elegant look.

Perfect for the director of catering at the last of the Bradford parties, on the eve of Sean's wedding to Muffy.

She'd thought about coming down with some exotic disease. Or asking Marcy to go in her place. But Alex couldn't do it.

There was such a thing as professional pride.

And there was such a thing as no pride at all. She desperately wanted to see Sean one more time before he became Muffy's husband.

MUFFY'S HANDS were like ice.

"Where is he?" she whispered as Sean led her to a corner of the spacious Gold Room.

"I don't know. Something must have come up at Stealthco. But I'm sure he'll be here in time for the wedding."

"Sean, what do we do if he's not here?"

She was looking at him as if he had the answers to the world's problems tattooed on his forehead. He loved Phillip like a brother, but Sean couldn't help contrasting Muffy with Alex.

He saw her the moment she walked into the ballroom. Just like that first night in her office, she took his breath away.

The black dress was fitted, skimming her curves. He liked the style. A woman had to be truly striking to wear a dress like that. She'd coiled her hair on top of her head. It was a striking foil to her bone structure, the high cheekbones and square, strong jaw.

He looked to his heart's content. But he couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze. *She trusted you. And you betrayed that trust.*

"Sean. Sean!" The whisper had a tinge of desperation. "My mother's coming this way!"

As much as he longed to go to Alex and tell her the truth, he couldn't. Not until Phillip arrived. If he was totally honest with himself, he'd admit he was just as nervous as Muffy was. The wedding was tomorrow at three in the afternoon. There were eight hundred people invited, the cream of both New

York and Los Angeles society. The rich and famous and powerful.

But just what was he going to do, if Phillip didn't show up before the minister asked him if he was going to have and to hold, love and cherish, till death do us part?

Nothing like making a total ass out of yourself in front of a cast of thousands.

"Hello, Sean."

Constance. Muffy was clinging to his arm as if it were a lifeline.

"Hello, Constance."

"Ready for tomorrow?"

She looked so pleased with herself. He wanted to throttle her. But he smiled instead.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You won't change your mind about the morning suit?" Typical Constance, still trying to get her way.

"No." Even if he felt like a clown, he didn't have to look like one.

"Well, I'll leave the two of you to mingle, and I'll see you tomorrow, Sean."

Yes, indeedy.

He glanced up and caught Alex looking at him. Their eyes locked and held until a blush rose in her face and she looked away, her eyes dark and glistening.

And Sean wondered, for the first time in his life, if he'd found the deal he just couldn't make.

ALEX GLANCED away, furious with herself that he'd caught her looking at him.

And, ignoring all protocol when it came to overseeing a party of this importance, she walked over to the bar where Tony was mixing drinks.

"Perrier with a twist, Alex?"

"Something stronger."

The drink he handed her was long, cool and tropical—with a lethal kick to it and a tiny paper umbrella. Trust Tony to have a sense of humor.

"This'll do it." She took a long swig out of the tall, frosted glass as she started across the room.

What a world.

Now, in one of those romance novels where this would have been a marriage of convenience, she would know exactly what to do. Cool and regal, lightning-fast with the witty comeback, she would be parrying conversational sparklers with her hero, making him realize there was only one woman in the world he could ever love.

But the way these things really happened found Sean and Muffy in the center of the room, surrounded by throngs of well-wishers, while she was on the sidelines, drinking a tropical bomb.

That about sums things up.

She glanced at her watch. Only an hour to go, and then she could legitimately leave. And leave she would. She was spending the night in her room at the hotel. The suit she was wearing to the wedding was already hanging in the closet.

TO HELL WITH IT. Tell her the truth. How angry can Phillip get? She won't tell anyone—

"Sean?" The voice was almost a whisper.

"What is it, Muffy?"

"I don't feel so good. I think I need some air."

And with that, she fainted.

ALEX ALMOST choked on her paper umbrella when she saw Sean sweep Muffy up into his arms. The girl's head was hanging limp, her color was bad, and her mother was furious.

And he cut a wide swathe through the crowd, straight toward her.

"Where can she lie down?"

"Take her to my room."

And with Constance following them like a shark who smelled blood, Alex led the way to the elevator.

Once Muffy was on Alex's bed, Sean sitting beside her, Constance exploded.

"Look what she's doing to me! What is *wrong* with her. This is the wedding every girl dreams of having, and she faints at her own party!"

Alex realized that if Constance Bradford's facade was starting to crumble, they were all in big trouble.

"Mrs. Bradford, why don't you go downstairs and see to your guests? Sean, why don't you go with her?"

As she turned to him, she murmured, "Get her out of here."

Sean looked worried. "One of the guests is a doctor. I'll send him up."

The girl was sitting up in bed sipping 7-Up when the doctor arrived.

Alex moved away from the bed to give them privacy, but she could hear bits of the conversation.

"Anything you could have been allergic to?"

"No."

"Have you fainted before?"

"No."

Muffy looked so pathetic in her crumpled pink party dress that Alex's heart went out to her. She wasn't even given the satisfaction of hating the other woman.

And then, the million dollar question.

"Could you be pregnant?" the doctor asked gently.

Muffy paused, then covered her face and whispered, "Please don't tell my mother."

And Alex felt the blood leave her face in a rush as it began to roar in her

ears. She lowered her shaking body into a chair.

Pregnant?

"How far along are you?"

"Almost four months."

Three months. You met Sean three months ago. They must have announced their engagement the second she missed her period.

"Have you been eating well, getting enough rest?"

Muffy started to cry. "I'm just so scared."

"And the father? Is he—" And here the doctor hesitated. "Is he the sort of man who's going to be there for you?"

"Oh, yes." Muffy hiccuped. "He's so wonderful, so loyal—" And dissolved into another bout of sobbing.

Alex felt her eyes filling. She remembered Sean's words. *And if I told you it had everything to do with loyalty and nothing to do with love—*

"Can you stay with her?"

Alex blinked. The doctor was speaking to her.

"Of course." No matter what she was feeling, she could not possibly take it out on Muffy.

"I want her to rest until the wedding." He lowered his voice. "She's a high-strung little thing, and there's a very real possibility she could lose the baby. Am I making myself clear?"

Alex nodded.

"Here's my number. I'm going downstairs to tell Constance her daughter is all right. I'll be at the wedding tomorrow. Don't hesitate to call me if you need help. I don't care what time it is."

"Thank you."

He left, then Alex went and sat in the overstuffed chair next to the bed and watched Muffy sleep.

Now, this is more like one of those novels. Jilted heroine with the other woman who's pregnant and could lose

the baby if she doesn't stay quiet. If I was a heroine worth my salt, she'd be up doing the mambo—

But she couldn't. Even the joke fell flat in her mind.

Muffy was just too helpless.

But there's another person involved in this.

Before the night was over, she was going to pay Sean Lawton a little visit.

And tell him exactly what she thought of him.

"SEAN? Alex. Could I come up and see you for just a second."

"Of course."

Muffy had slept for almost an hour. When she woke, she had sworn Alex to secrecy.

With Marcy watching Muffy, Alex took the elevator up to the Presidential Suite.

Sean was waiting for her.

"How's Muffy?"

At least he was concerned about her.

"Fine. I just—" She took a deep breath. "I just want you to know that she told me everything. I know what's going on now."

"You do?" He seemed incredulous.

"Yes. Why you're going ahead with the wedding. You're nothing if not loyal, Sean."

"Alex." His eyes darkened, then before she knew what was happening, he'd pulled her into his arms.

"I thought I'd lost you. I couldn't tell you what was going on. You understand that now, don't you? But now we can be together."

Her brain was shutting down, but she had just enough sanity left to dig the stiletto heel of her black pump into his foot.

"Ahhh!"

That got his attention.

He released her, then grabbed his foot and began hopping around the room, his face a grimace of pain.

"*Pig with a capital P!*" she shouted. Then, because this man had succeeded in driving her completely out of her mind, she pushed him over onto the big bed, watching him land with a resounding thwack.

"Just what in God's name did you think I was going to do when I found out?"

"Alex, I realize it was a bit of deception, but—"

"Oh, no, just schmooze me along, Alex the idiot. You let me think we had some kind of future together, when all the time you *knew*—"

"Of course, I knew. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't known—"

"Answer me this, then, smart guy. Where are we all going to live? In your house in Malibu?"

"Alex, what are you—"

"I may be naive, but I'm *not* stupid! What were you doing, lining me up so you could be assured of having a continual good time in bed?"

"Alex, you don't understand—"

"No, you don't understand." Now, hating herself for showing any vulnerability, she started to cry. "I trusted you. I believed in you, and I thought we had something special. And I *loved* you, you big liar."

"Alex—"

"Don't touch me. I'm leaving now. I'm walking out that door and after this wedding is over, I *never, ever* want to see you again!"

She'd done it, pushed him past the brink. His eyes had darkened, his jaw was tightening.

"So you don't want to hear my side of it?"

"I wasn't aware that pigs could talk."

"Get out."

"With pleasure!"

But Alex was only halfway down to her floor in the elevator when she burst into tears.

AT FOUR A.M., Sean finished off a bottle of fine Scotch, then lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

Pig? What the hell was she talking about?

AT 4:10 a.m., Alex finished the last of an incredible piece of chocolate whipped-cream cake, then lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

I realize it was a bit of deception... What the hell was he talking about?

AND IN New Hampshire, early that same morning, it finally stopped snowing.

*

"YOU CAN GO NOW, Phil. Colonel Brimley flew into Washington this morning and opened the bidding."

"It's too late." Phillip was sitting at the table, nursing the last of a bottle of good Scotch. He'd blown it. He wasn't sure what Sean and Muffy were going to do, but he knew he'd failed her.

He glanced at his watch. Almost noon. The wedding began at three. He'd never make it in three hours.

"Well, if you get off your butt and stop feeling sorry for yourself, you can just make it. The time change gives you six hours to get there. Add to that the company jet and a helicopter ride in from LAX."

Slowly, ever so carefully, he lifted his head.

"You're kidding."

"Nope. I explained that you were late to your own wedding. The com-

pany wants to bend over backward for you."

"Oh my God! I've got to pack. Where's my suit?"

"No time. Here's your jacket. Bill, Stan, get him to the jet. And sober him up on the way!"

PHILLIP WAS over Texas before he thought about calling Sean.

"Is there a phone on this thing?"

"Sure." Stan and Bill exchanged looks. They hadn't exactly sobered Phillip up.

"Would one of you dial L.A. information for me? The—the Biltmore, that's it."

A PIG, EH? Well, I'm going to have my say before this day is over.

Sean was still angry as he stood beneath the stinging, cold spray. The Scotch had definitely been a major mistake. All that was on his mind was getting through this fiasco of a wedding.

The shower was so loud, he didn't hear the ringing phone.

"MAYBE—MAYBE he's not staying in the Presidential Suite."

"Hey, Phil, buddy, are you sure there's a wedding going on at all, or was it just some ruse to ditch that lousy weather and head for the coast?"

"No. I'm not making this up. I've got to get hold of Sean."

Stan looked at Bill. Bill scratched his head.

"Maybe the hotel director."

They dialed again and reached the front desk. Bill put his hand over the receiver.

"How about the catering office, Phil? Maybe someone there can reach him."

"Catering offices, the Biltmore. Can I help you?" Marcy didn't mind slipping into her old role on a Saturday.

"Who is this? What? Wait, talk slower, this is kind of— *What!* Phil, slow down, I can't understand you."

Within minutes, Marcy knew the entire story.

"Yes. Yes, I'll get the message to Sean. That's right, you can land on the hotel helipad. I'll be up there waiting for you...."

"SHE'S HYSTERICAL, Ms. Michaels, you've got to help her."

"Don't tell her mother. I'll take care of it."

The bridesmaid looked really concerned, and Alex swiftly followed her to Muffy's room.

She was sitting on a small stool, sobbing.

"Muffy," Alex said softly, glancing around to be sure no one was within earshot. "Think of the baby."

Muffy grabbed both her hands. Her eyes were rimmed in pink. "I can't do this. I can't go out there in front of all those people. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Muffy, you've got to get a hold of yourself—"

"No, you don't understand. I can't marry Sean. There's someone else."

And Alex, holding Muffy's hands and looking at this gentle little creature, suddenly knew exactly how Scarlett had felt at Melanie's deathbed.

"Muffy, no. Believe me, there isn't."

"There is! Oh, I know Sean has been strong for me and tried to make everything all right, but I don't know what he's going to do now! He didn't count on anything happening this way."

Muffy started to sob again as two of her bridesmaids crowded closer, murmuring words of comfort.

"I can't marry Sean. I don't love him, I—"

A total, absolute silence descended in the dressing room, and Alex knew, without looking up, that Constance Bradford had come in the door.

"Get out. Everyone get out." Her tone was clipped, and the bridesmaids scattered, their slippered feet pattering over the carpet as in a hasty rendition of *Swan Lake*.

"That means you, too, Alex."

Alex stood, Muffy still clinging to her hand.

"No."

"Get out right this minute or I'll have you fired. And *you*, get up." Constance grabbed Muffy's elbow and yanked her to her feet, causing her to let go of Alex's hand. "If you think you're going to ruin everything, young lady, just be sure you're willing to pay the price. I will make your life a living hell if you don't marry Sean Lawton!"

"I can't, I don't love him, I love—"

The hand came up before Alex could do anything about it, and Constance's palm cracked across Muffy's fragile cheekbone. She fell awkwardly, and Alex was down beside her in an instant.

"Get her dressed. Right now. I'm standing here until she walks out that door."

And Alex, knowing she was trapped with one sick cookie, reached for the lace confection that was Muffy's bridal gown.

THE VEIL COVERED Muffy's face so no one could see the redness of her eyes.

The three seamstresses had been called in, and those final stitches had ensured a perfect fit.

"Well, Alex, we have a wedding to run, don't we?" Constance's blue eyes were cold. It was no-holds-barred now that Alex had seen her slap Muffy.

"I'm not leaving her alone with you." Alex could feel Muffy trembling behind her.

"That's fine with me. Muffy's not going to do anything foolish now, are you, dear?"

"No." The one word was barely a whisper.

And at that moment, Alex knew Muffy had given up.

"WHAT TIME is it, Charlie?"

"Three-fifteen."

"The wedding's running late."

Colleen glanced around unobtrusively, but Alex was nowhere to be found.

"I hope this all works out," she said softly.

"It will, darling, it will."

The crowd murmured as Sean and his brother, Brian, came in a side door and approached the altar.

Colleen squeezed Charlie's hand, closed her eyes and uttered a silent prayer.

"HEY, STAN, we're landing in ten minutes. I think we'd better get him sobered up."

"Coffee?"

"Nope. Make him a sandwich while I dump this cold water over his head."

THE TRUMPETS began to play right on cue, just as Marcy had known they would.

And Marcy, in Renaissance costume, was swept into the procession

entering the Crystal Room, just as she had known she would be.

The procession that went right by Sean Lawton.

She patted the note with her free hand and kept time with the stately music.

IT HAD BEGUN. The wedding of the year.

And Alex felt absolutely nothing.

Funny how life worked. When something was taken away from you, something was often given back. She might have lost Sean, but after that scene in Muffy's dressing room, she'd forgiven her own mother completely.

Constance Bradford was a monster. Meredith Michaels had done what she thought was best.

There was no comparison.

The trumpets had sounded, the procession was underway. Everything was going perfectly, and two people who didn't love each other were going to be joined together forever in holy matrimony.

Don't think about it.

She refused to look up at the altar.

Leave. You've done enough.

It was then, in the midst of the group leading the Renaissance procession, that she saw Marcy.

SEAN SAW HER at almost the same time, and his first reaction was surprise. Was Marcy supposed to be in the parade? She was trying to catch his attention.

Their eyes met. She glanced down.

He saw the small scrap of paper in her hand. The relief he felt was overwhelming.

And as Marcy passed Sean, she slipped him the note, smiled to a shocked Constance in the front row and skipped merrily on her way.

Sean knew Constance hadn't seen the exchange. He glanced down at the note in his palm, read it.

Hang in there, Father Lawton. The cavalry is coming!

And he smiled.

ALEX CHOSE that exact moment to glance at Sean.

He's smiling. How dare he?

She was as close to berserk as she'd ever been in her life, with the exception of last night in Sean's suite. What was Marcy doing in the Renaissance parade? Why was Sean grinning like a real groom? And Muffy...

As if on cue, the harpist began to play the familiar strains of the "Wedding March."

I can't bear it.

But she couldn't tear herself away. Muffy looked ethereal, a vision in lace, so delicate and fragile.

Sean, the rat, didn't look half bad in his tuxedo.

The crowd was silent. This was what they had come for. This was the event of the Christmas season, and they were going to relish every second of it.

This is the worst day of the rest of my life.

"DEARLY BELOVED, we are gathered here today..."

Alex rarely cried at weddings, but she could already feel tears gathering in her eyes.

What a mess. She doesn't love Sean; he doesn't love her, I still love him, and who knows if he still loves me or who in God's name loves Muffy...

Definitely the wedding of the year.

"Do you, Elizabeth Anne Bradford, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, for better or worse, in sickness and in health..."

Muffy's quiet "I do" was barely audible.

"Do you, Sean Lawton—"

Alex bit her lip, hard, but the tears started to roll down her cheeks.

"—to be your lawfully wedded wife—"

Alex swiped unobtrusively at her eyes.

"—as long as you both shall live?"

"I—"

Alex glanced up, her eyes wide, as she realized Sean was hesitating.

"I—" he suddenly turned to face the crowd, Muffy leaning heavily against him.

"I—want you all to know there's been a slight change of plans. I'm not the groom—he'll be arriving shortly. But in the meantime, I'd like to tell you about a boy and a girl who grew up together and faced the most unbelievable odds to be together."

Now, utter pandemonium broke out, excited murmurs were racing across the crowd. Alex, in total shock, still craned her neck to see the one face she couldn't wait to get a look at.

Constance Bradford was turning a lovely shade of purple.

Sean continued, his voice low and soothing.

"She was all of twelve years old when she told me she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this man. He fell in love with her at the same time, with her gentleness, her beauty..."

"COME ON, Phil, there's no time to lose!"

"What do you mean, I have to wear tights? Marcy, no!"

"There's no time to explain. Just put them on."

"... AND SO I agreed to the deception, knowing that these two wanted to build

a life together, that they shared the kind of love that comes along only once in a lifetime... what I didn't count on was falling in love, myself."

Alex couldn't meet his eyes. Her vision was blurring, her eyes were full of tears. How could she have ever doubted this man? Here he was, telling hundreds of people that he loved her.

"It was the most painful thing I have ever experienced, having to hurt the woman I love..."

The woman I love.

Alex knew she was a goner.

"So, to wind this all up, Phillip should be here any minute, and when he does arrive—"

"No!"

Constance Bradford finally broke, and it was a glorious sight. She rushed to the altar and grabbed Sean's other arm.

"Stop it! Stop it! You're going to marry my daughter! She doesn't love that spineless—"

"Yes, I do."

Alex could have wept at the rapturous look on Muffy's face.

"You can't do this to me!" Constance screamed. At that exact moment, a member of the press who had sneaked in dressed as a minstrel snapped several shots.

And Alex didn't even try to confiscate the camera.

When the crowd roared, Alex brought her attention back to the front of the ballroom, where Sean was stuffing a handkerchief tightly in Constance's mouth. Then he marched her back to her husband's side.

"John," he said, "please restrain her."

"I've been trying to for years."

That got the biggest laugh of all.

IT WAS THE strangest wedding Alex had ever attended. While she stood in the back of the ballroom watching total pandemonium reign, the servers, at Sean's request, began bringing the guests small plates of canapés and glasses of punch. The crowd was almost back under control until Muffy screamed, "Phillip!"

As she picked up the long bridal skirt and train with one hand and began to run toward a tall, lanky blonde in Renaissance garb, her face lit up with the purest of emotions, a love so overwhelming it almost hurt to look at her face.

Muffy was beautiful.

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause as she fell into his arms and burst into tears.

THE REAL WEDDING was about to get underway when someone yelled, "Hey, Sean, is she here?"

Alex, knowing exactly who this bozo was talking about, glanced at the nearest door. Even though two tall Renaissance men stood guard, she was sure they'd let her out.

Her feet started to move before she gave the matter coherent thought, but Sean was faster.

When he swept her up into his arms, she seriously thought about killing him.

"Put me down," she whispered furiously.

"I'm not letting you go again."

"Down. Now. I mean it, Sean. I'll punch you."

"I love you."

Sean set Alex down in front of eight hundred people, and she had no choice but to behave herself.

"Are you going to make it a double wedding?" the same bozo called out of the crowd.

"I haven't even asked her," Sean called back. Alex could see that Sean was feeling cocky.

"Why don't you ask her?" the man called out.

Then all she could see was Sean's blue-gray eyes, and suddenly the cockiness was replaced by the slightest vulnerability.

She stood perfectly still, knowing this was another moment she would remember for the rest of her life.

He fumbled—Sean fumbled!—in his pocket and brought out a small velvet box.

"Whatever it takes, Alex. Down on my knees, whatever you want. Forgive me for what I did, but I couldn't bear the thought of you with another man. I love you, and I want you in my life. Will you marry me, Alexandra?"

And she knew then that she would, if only to hear her name every day, just the way he said it.

When it was this right, it was so easy.

But she couldn't resist.

"Well..."

"Alex."

How she loved to torment this man.

"Yes."

There was another burst of applause when he slipped the diamond ring on her finger. And they both turned around just in time to see Phillip's incredulous face, hear "A baby?" come out of his mouth in a strangled voice and watch as he crumpled to the floor of the Crystal Ballroom in a dead faint.

"A FABULOUS WEDDING, dear. My Christie is getting married next June, and I'm going to make an appointment with you on Monday!"

"I don't know when I've had a better time at a wedding, Alex. You really outdid yourself."

Alex smiled as she felt a familiar arm curl around her waist.

"You've been praised enough. Dance with me."

"Whatever you say, Sean."

"Marcy and Brian certainly seem to have hit it off," she said, looking up at him.

"He likes her, Renaissance dress and all." Sean tightened his grip on her ever so slightly, then said softly, "I thought we could catch an evening flight to Vegas, get married and join Phil and Muffy on the yacht. How does the Caribbean sound to you?"

"What? No formal wedding?"

He rolled his eyes in disgust, and she burst out laughing.

"Alex, we could be married by midnight."

"Boy, you sure are in a hurry. What about my courtship? My engagement party?"

"Alex." The look in his eyes was deadly serious. "I don't want to wait any longer."

"I'm not asking you to wait."

THEY MADE IT to Las Vegas, then flew to join Phillip and Muffy on the yacht, which Sean promptly rechristened *Alexandra the Great*.





KASEY MICHAELS

Compliments of the Groom



Josh never dreamed he'd fall for his red-haired, green-eyed "wife" or that his motives for first posing as her husband would get in the way of their very real romance.

“*I won! I won! I won!*”

Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine danced around the room, alternately laughing and shouting.

Jeanne Tisdale, head instructor of the Happy Days Nursery School for more years than she cared to count, was accustomed to the exuberance of her young assistant, and now simply sat back in her desk chair and waited for the whirlwind that was Mandy to blow herself out.

Mandy was now standing in front of her, palms flat on the desk. “Well? Why aren’t you dancing with joy?”

“Amanda,” Jeanne said calmly, looking up into the younger woman’s widely smiling face. “I’m forty-three years old. I just spent three hours with Justin Brosious, Todd Terrance Tillson, Sean ‘Mad Dog’ O’Connor and a dozen other damp-bottomed terrors. I couldn’t dance with joy if Robert Redford waltzed in here and threw himself at my feet. Would you settle for a small whoopee—once I find out what I’m celebrating, that is?” she urged.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Mandy exclaimed penitently, running a hand through her short crop of burnished curls. “You remember how the stereo broke last month, and how we haven’t been able to afford a replacement?” she began. “Well, I happened to hear about a contest on WFML—you know, that hard-rock radio station they play in the coffee shop across the street—and, surprise, surprise, they were having a contest to give away CD’s, T-shirts, and, oh, all sorts of prizes, with the top prize to be a state-of-the-art stereo

system.” Mandy once more looked like she was about to erupt. “And I won *first prize!*”

“But, Mandy, dear,” Jeanne said, “don’t you want the prize for yourself?”

Mandy waved a hand in dismissal. “Mrs. Thorton would throw me out on my ear if I played the thing above a whisper. I’ll just reserve the right to play some of my own music on it after school hours.”

Jeanne looked intently into Amanda’s face. “What did you have to do to win?” she asked at last.

“I didn’t have to do anything except complete a sentence. You know—one of those twenty-five words or less things.”

Jeanne saw Mandy lower her dark lashes to hide eyes that couldn’t conceal a lie, and a strange, nervous churning began in her stomach. “What was the sentence, Amanda?” she prodded gently, not really wanting to hear the answer.

“Well,” Mandy began, her voice so low Jeanne had to strain to hear her. “It was just one of those silly things. You know—like...um...like, oh, I eat this cereal *because*, or I like this car best *because*, or...um...we make love best to music *because*—”

“*What!*” the older woman shouted.

Mandy rushed into speech. “It was a contest for newlyweds. I just made up some drivel and sent it in.” She tilted her head and smiled reminiscently. “Though actually, it *was* rather good—all that malarkey about moonlight and bearskin rugs.”

"Oh, good grief."

"I just—er—I just sort of *smudged* my 'Ms.' on the entry so that it looked more like a 'Mrs.'"

"Oh, I see. Innocent dishonesty," Jeanne answered dully, pressing her fingertips to her suddenly throbbing temples.

"I have the day off tomorrow anyway," Mandy said. "All I have to do is show up, identify myself as 'Ms-rs' Amanda Tremaine, and pick up my prize. See? It's that simple."

THE OFFICES of WFML—both the radio and the television stations operated out of the same building—were situated atop a medium-size hill just outside the city of Allentown.

She'd explain her reason for the fib she had told on the entry form and then throw herself on the deejay's mercy. Surely Vic Harrison would understand and give her the stereo anyway. After all, hers was the best entry.

"Amanda Tremaine," the receptionist said unemotionally, holding a red-tipped nail against a line of typing that was part of a long list of names. "Down the hall to your left, you'll see the freight elevator. The lobby elevator is being serviced. Second floor, three corridors down to your right, third doorway. Don't go in if the red light is on."

The elevator door took its own sweet time in opening. Mumbling and grumbling to herself, she kept her head bowed and stepped inside. She pushed the button for the second floor.

The machine began its ascent with a jerk. But just as quickly the elevator gave another jerk, breathed a loud wheeze and then settled itself firmly between the two floors.

"Oh, Lord," Mandy exclaimed aloud. "God's getting me for lying!"

THE MAN leaning a shoulder lazily against the rear wall of the elevator had lifted his brows in silent approval of the feminine form that stood before him, then realized he had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he had somehow forgotten to get off at the first floor.

After inspecting the female all the way down to her slim, well-turned ankles, he allowed his assessing gaze to return to the top of her frame, to linger on the riot of curls that he was sure had earned her the nickname of Carrot Top in grade school.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," he began in his most bracing voice, only to be cut off by Mandy's high-pitched yelp.

"Where—where did you come from?" she asked, whirling around to notice the other occupant of the elevator for the first time.

His deep blue eyes crinkled a bit around the corners as he smiled a wide, lopsided grin. "Well, first, or so they tell me, I was nothing more than a gleam in my father's eye. Then—"

"Stop that!" Why do I have to get all the weirdos? Mandy asked herself, running a hand through her hair.

Lord, but she was a looker, the man thought. I especially like the turned-up nose. And the freckles, yeah, they're just the right touch.

"I'm being punished," Mandy said, distractedly looking around her and seeing nothing but her prison—four walls of pea green chipped paint—and her fellow prisoner, a first-class nut case. She closed her eyes and gave a defeated sigh. "I should have known this was going to happen," she moaned. "Now the elevator is going to fall and I'll be killed."

"Are you hysterical or is that outburst supposed to be in aid of something extremely deep?" her companion

asked, leaning his broad shoulder against the elevator wall, all thoughts of his luncheon meeting forgotten as he watched the woman's antics with growing good humor.

Mandy ignored his teasing sarcasm. Hugging her arms around herself, she suddenly whirled away from him. She muttered fatalistically, "Oh, what difference does it make. I'm being punished, that's what it is. It was only a *little* fib, hardly even worth stopping an entire elevator for, for goodness' sake. *When* will I ever learn to look before I leap?"

The man, who seemed utterly invulnerable to any hints he should mind his own business, placed himself directly in front of her. "Here's where I either kiss you senseless or throw cold water in your face. Which do you prefer?"

"What?"

"You're hysterical, lady," he told her calmly. "Haven't you ever been to the movies? It's standard Hollywood practice. You have your choice of treatment. Either that or you stop babbling about God getting you and tell me what has you in such an uproar."

Mandy took another look at the tall, dark, terribly handsome man smiling down at her before launching into a garbled version of her descent into sin.

"Is that all?" the man asked incredulously once she was done. "God, lady, if you're going to hell for that, where do you suppose they put Al Capone?"

"Don't try to cheer me up," Amanda said, causing her companion to issue a sharp bark of laughter.

"Just go in to this Harrison guy and brazen it out."

"You really think so?" she asked, impulsively grabbing his muscular forearm. "After all," she went on, "it wasn't like I was planning on robbing

the crown jewels or something. Or trying to take something just because I wanted it for myself. I mean, it *is* for the child—"

A firm hand grasped her chin and turned her toward him, their gazes meeting and locking as he whispered huskily, "Lady, did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?" Then he leaned forward and joined his lips softly with hers.

It was just the faintest whisper of a kiss, but Mandy thought she could feel the earth moving beneath her.

It wasn't until an amused male voice penetrated her distracted thoughts that she understood that the elevator had at last completed its journey to the second floor. "Well, *hello* there," the voice sang out mischievously. "I wondered where you had gotten to. Helen didn't say you were bringing the lucky hubby along, Mrs. Tremaine. No wonder he's grinning like that—that was some letter!"

The man who had taken advantage of her agitation by kissing her now stood up and held out his hand to the leering Harrison.

"Mr. Harrison?" he said cordially in his deep, husky voice. "I'm Mr. Tremaine. You'll have to excuse the wife here. We haven't been married long, you know, and she still gets a little flustered whenever I kiss her. You understand how it is," he ended, winking at the disc jockey in a way that had Mandy aching to choke them both.

"Follow me, Mr. and Mrs. Tremaine," he said, starting off down the hallway. "I tried to get hold of you this morning to let you know about a change in our plans, but then I decided it would be more fun to tell you two in person. It seems we have a little surprise for you two!"

Mandy shot her pseudo-husband a questioning look, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and took her hand. "By the way," he whispered, leaning over so that his warm breath caressed her ear, "what's your first name?"

"Mandy," she squeaked. "Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine, actually."

"Very nice, Amanda Elizabeth," he told her, giving her trembling hand a reassuring squeeze. "Just call me Joe and we'll be fine. Just fine. Trust me."

Mandy groaned and allowed herself to be led down the corridor to her fate.

"YOU'RE GOING ON a *what!*"

Mandy pushed Jeanne back into her chair and cautioned her to remember she was an old lady of forty-three. "I said, I'm going on a honeymoon in Atlantic City for five days so the station can film us for their nighttime-magazine television show. Joe says if we ever tell the truth they'll arrest me, and maybe him, too, and so I have to go through with it—surely you can understand that."

Jeanne Tisdale, not saying a solitary word, and looking neither right nor left, stood up and walked toward her classroom full of terrible twos. At the moment, they seemed to be the lesser of two evils.

*

THE MAN Mandy still knew only as Joe Tremaine walked briskly down the tiled corridor and pushed open the door that led into the executive offices of WFML. It was after hours and the secretary who sat behind the desk, guarding the new owner's private sanctum, was gone for the day.

Without stopping to knock on the double wooden doors, he entered the executive office and headed straight for

the tiled shower that was part of the suite, dropping his sneakers, jeans and T-shirt haphazardly along the way.

He wasn't usually sloppy but tonight he was in a hurry. He had a date with his "wife."

A scant fifteen minutes later he was dressed in white duck slacks and a faded sea green collarless Panama Jack shirt that he knew looked good with his tan. He was just putting his billfold in his front pocket when the door from the secretary's office opened.

"Going out on the town, Josh?" the older man who had entered asked, lowering himself gingerly into a chair. "I should have known it wouldn't take you more than a day in town to get yourself lined up with one of the local beauties. Lord, it's been a long day. I'm bushed. I just thought I'd stop by to hear your first impressions before heading back to the hotel. So? Do you think we made a good deal? I've always wanted to own my own television station. The radio end of it was just a bonus."

The whole time the older man had been talking, the man he had called Josh was busy, combing his hair in front of the mirror that hung over the credenza. "I like the station fine, Dad," he said. "In fact, I think I like your 'bonus' best of all. I find I have to be out of town for several days starting Saturday. Do you think you can handle the paperwork on this project yourself?"

The older man, who looked much like his son except for the gray hair at his temples, stood tall. "I've been handling things since before you cut your milk teeth. This whole investment is small potatoes and you know it. I just thought I needed a hobby, that's all."

Josh looked around the expensively decorated office. "Some hobby. It's a good trick you didn't decide to dabble in railroads. I don't think even Phillips, Inc. is up to turning a profit from Amtrak." Joshua Phillips walked toward the door, picking up his silk sports jacket as he went. "Put a candle in the window, Dad, I may be late."

THEY WERE seated in a cozy wrap-around corner booth in the restaurant.

"You're right," Mandy said, "we have to discuss this stupid fool stunt you talked us into."

"I talked us into!" Josh exclaimed, causing a few heads to turn in their direction.

Mandy turned her head to look at him accusingly. "You're the one who jumped in with both feet, smiling that sickening smile and saying, 'Hi, I'm Mr. Tremaine' and then *winking* in that horrid way like you and Vic Harrison had some dirty secret between you."

Mandy closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the memory of the delighted children who had danced and sung all that afternoon to the tunes that filled the playroom courtesy of the new stereo. It was worth it, she told herself over and over in a soundless chant.

She shook her head. "I can't go through with it."

Josh took one look at Mandy's tear-bright eyes. What had begun as a lark had become a deadly serious project on Josh's part. No way was he letting Amanda back out now.

He reached over and took her hands in his. "Amanda, I—I need your help," he improvised wildly. "There are things—faintly shady things—that can go on in radio and television sta-

tions. Things that groups such as the FCC investigate."

"You're a government agent?" she asked in a breathy whisper, already caught up in the thrill of the thing. She leaned back in her seat, giving him a superior smile. "I thought that Vic Harrison guy had shifty eyes when we met him. What is it—bribes, payola, kickbacks?"

My, what a great big imagination you have, grandma, Josh thought, barely keeping a straight face. He never said he was an agent, he just said there could be problems with stations.

No matter how hard Mandy pushed, Josh refused to say anything else, reminding her that secret government assignments were always on a "need-to-know" basis.

"You'll be less liable to slip up if you keep thinking of me as Joe," he told her.

Josh had said that the small station's only mobile cameraman, the one sure to be sent on this assignment, could be the subject of some investigation. It was a stroke of inspiration that finally satisfied Mandy and had Josh silently pitying the poor cameraman, who was sure to be confused by Mandy's interest in his every movement.

Mandy leaned back against the seat and put a hand to her stomach. "That steak was so good. Burnt on the outside, nearly raw on the inside. The chef did it perfectly. Grandfather always said I was a cannibal, but to me Pittsburgh-rare is the only way to eat good steak."

"Grandfather?" Josh repeated casually. "Does he live in town?"

Instantly Mandy was on the defensive. "Why do you want to know? You're investigating WFML, not me."

Easy, Phillips, easy, he cautioned himself. Flicking Mandy's cheek play-

fully, he said, "I just wanted to know if I was going to end up looking down the business end of a shotgun before this honeymoon is over. After all, grandfathers tend to be very protective of their unmarried granddaughters."

Her shoulders visibly relaxing, Mandy forced a smile. "No, Grandfather doesn't live around here. But if he did, you wouldn't be the only one in trouble. My helping you to uncover something illegal going on at the station would get his blood boiling." Mandy laughed shortly. "When it comes to business dealings, well, let's just say Grandfather believes in the old adage 'all's fair in love and war.'"

He allowed a companionable silence to continue while he drove the car around the block and headed west. He turned the radio on.

"Where are we going?" Mandy asked at last, suddenly coming out of her reverie. "I thought you were taking me home."

Mandy could barely make out Josh's profile in the dim light of early evening. "You don't want to go back to that hot apartment yet, do you? I want to see a bit of your fair city while I'm here. What's that over there?"

"That's Wild Water Kingdom. We took the nursery-school kids there already, and I think I had even more fun than they did. And got a sunburn that tormented me for a week!" she added, touching her shoulders gingerly in remembrance.

Josh turned his head to look at her. "Tender skin, Carrot Top?"

"Carrot Top! Don't call me that!" she warned, jabbing his shoulder with her hand. "I've killed for less."

Pulling into the parking lot in front of a candle shop that was closed for the night, Josh stopped the car and turned off the ignition. "And hot-tempered

too," he teased, knowing he was pushing his luck but loving every minute of it. "Don't you ever worry that you might be considered a stereotype?"

"Don't you ever worry that you might one day use that smart mouth of yours to bite off more than you can chew?" she shot back.

Leaning back against the car door, Josh gave a low whistle. "Hey, I like red hair. I even like freckles." Easing himself across the bench seat to sit next to her, he slid an arm around her shoulders. "I could even learn to like green eyes, given half a chance."

Mandy could feel the heat radiating from his body, he was sitting so close beside her. "I am not a stereotype. I'm me. You're the stereotype."

"Me? A stereotype?"

She saw him wince, and knew she had scored a few points of her own. "Your hair is perfect. Your teeth are perfect. Your tan is perfect. Everything about you is perfect." She threw up her hands as if the enormity of his perfection was just too much to be borne. "You're just too darn perfect to be real, that's what."

"There's one thing about me that's not perfect," Josh interrupted. "I'm not a perfect gentleman." So saying, he positioned his hand firmly on the back of Mandy's neck and as his lips met hers, he effectively cut off her cataloging of his sins.

THE NEXT DAY it was back to WFML and another meeting with his father, who was beginning to ask a few pointed questions.

"I checked with your mother, and she said she hasn't heard from you about your going home," the elder Phillips began clumsily. "Your secretary doesn't know anything, either. So

where are you off to, son, some decadent singles cruise in the Caribbean?"

"Dad, I'm thirty-two years old," Josh said, shaking his head in mock sorrow. "So why do you persist in making me into the reincarnation of Don Juan?"

Matt Phillips sat down on the edge of the desk and grinned. "Because it keeps me young."

"You've struck out this time. This trip is strictly business."

"You're in business with *me*. So how come I don't know anything about it?" Something was in the air, he could smell it. "Don't you think I can be trusted?"

Josh reached up a hand and rubbed the back of his neck, wincing slightly. "It's not my secret to tell, Dad, I'm sorry. I've just got two favors to ask of you, okay?"

"I'm listening."

Josh scribbled a name and address on a slip of paper and passed it to his father. "Tell Vic Harrison, the disc jockey on the afternoon shift, to have a duplicate first-prize stereo and honeymoon trip awarded to the first runner-up in last week's contest." Again Josh wrote something down and handed it to his father. "Here's a telephone number where I can be reached. Don't use it unless there's an emergency. It's a hotel. Ask for Joe Tremaine when you call, and for God's sake don't give your own name if a woman answers the phone."

"You've got that wrong, son. It's 'if a man answers, hang up.'" Matt stared down at the telephone number. "Who the hell is Joe Tremaine?"

"I am, Dad, at least for the next five days."

The older man's eyes narrowed as he struggled to understand. "Are you in some sort of trouble, son?"

Josh gave his neck a last rub. "Do you remember a guy named Alexander Tremaine?"

"Tremaine. Of course! Now I know why that name sounds so familiar. Lord, that was all so long ago, three, maybe four years. Nasty business." He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he remembered Josh's reaction at the time. "Josh, what in blue blazes is going on?"

"I've been waiting a long time to see Alex Tremaine brought to his knees. And I think I've finally found just the way to do it."

"Dave Benjamin was a good friend once, Josh, and I know his breakdown threw you. But do you really think even Dave would want you to do this—whatever it is you're planning?"

Josh's face took on a closed expression. "I want to do it for Dave. I can get him, Dad, I know it."

"Legally?"

"Legally, Dad, honest."

"Morally?"

Josh's eyes shifted away from his father's piercing gaze. "Nothing's black and white, Dad, you know that."

Matt's blue eyes stared back levelly. "Revenge has the tendency to be a double-edged sword. Be careful you don't find yourself ending up as the injured party."

Suddenly, unbidden, a vision of Mandy's guileless face floated in front of Josh's eyes. "Yeah, Dad, I think I'm already figuring that one out for myself."

*

JOSH SAT slouched in the corner of the back seat of the plush navy blue limousine. From a poor beginning, Saturday morning had progressed steadily downhill. Mandy had greeted him with a scathing look and had stomped

off barefoot to her bedroom to get dressed, telling him his coffee was ready and waiting for him on the kitchen counter. It had been cold, too, as if she had planned it that way.

Then the film crew had shown up, ten minutes ahead of schedule and so full of early-morning cheer that he had entertained the thought of slowly strangling all three of them.

Chaos had instantly ensued, what with the technician grousing about the lack of electrical outlets for his precious equipment, and the director—some sorry-looking blonde named, of all things, Lois Lamour, and reeking of perfume—fluttering around telling them how “terrifically exciting” it was going to be to film in Atlantic City.

“Get me some coffee,” Josh had said to Mandy when he could get her attention.

“I did get you some already, darling,” she had chirped, wifelike, smiling at the cameraman, who had been inspecting her through the opening made by his cupped hands as he held them out in front of him like a camera lens.

“But it’s cold, *sweetheart*,” Josh had returned, smiling at the cameraman as he spoke through gritted teeth.

He never had gotten his coffee, he remembered now, looking across the expanse of the wide back seat at his pretend wife. Mandy was sitting primly in her corner, talking to the director, who was perched on one of the jump seats like an overage canary.

He remembered Mandy’s prediction that God was getting her for thinking about doing something wrong. Was it possible Josh was being punished for what he was about to do? It was beginning to seem possible.

“Have you been directing long, Lois?” Mandy was asking as the limousine purred its way along the Atlan-

tic City Expressway. “It seems so glamorous.”

Lois patted her bony chest and boasted: “I’ve been at WFML for three years now,” she said proudly. “I’m also the director for the weather segment of the evening news.”

Oh, so Lois Lamour was responsible for the weather segment, was she? Josh thought evilly. Sitting forward, he leaned over a bit to gain the director’s attention. “It’s such a pity about the weather girl. Gee, if only you could ditch that dame.”

“That’s my sister, Lana,” Lois replied, her bottom lip jutting out dangerously. “I handpicked her myself. The name Lana Lamour *means* weather, in Allentown!”

Placing a hand on Josh’s forearm, Mandy dug her nails into his bare flesh. “Joe is such a tease.” She turned to glare at Josh, who was sitting there, his blue eyes as wide and innocent-looking at a choirboy’s on Christmas morning.

He directed his cherubic gaze on Lois. “I was being silly, Lois,” he said dutifully. “I really like the weather girl.”

“Joe feels rather strange about this honeymoon, Lois,” Mandy broke in before Josh could say anything more.

“Yes, Lois,” he said, using his left hand to pry Mandy’s fingers off his forearm. “I guess this whole television thing is going to take a little getting used to. Mandy entered the contest without my consent, you know, and I really don’t know if I like having our honeymoon filmed for television. It’s so—so *public*, you know.”

“But we just *love* the stereo, don’t we, honeybun?” Mandy put in hastily.

Here was his chance to pay her back for the cold coffee. “It’s in our bedroom. Right beside the white bearskin

rug." He turned to Mandy, running a finger down the length of her throat and enjoying the slight wiggle of her body as she reacted to the shivers his teasing stroke had caused. "You read my wife's winning entry, didn't you, Lois? Need I say more?"

Look at him, Mandy thought wretchedly. His smile is positively obscene, she told herself, wishing she could crawl into a hole.

Chuck, the technician, who was still grumbling about trying to work around an inadequate electrical supply, perked up his ears from the front seat. "Yeah, I heard from Vic it was a real scorcher, Lois. What did it say?"

Joe looked over at Mandy, who was glaring at him in helpless rage and embarrassment, and wagged his eyebrows at her. "I think I just might have a copy in my coat, Herb," he said helpfully.

"I'll order a huge pot of hot coffee every morning from room service the moment you wake up," Mandy promised rashly in an undertone.

Josh looked at her for a long moment, deciding whether or not he felt satisfied. "Drop the 'honeybun' business and you've got yourself a deal," he bargained quietly, reaching for his coat, which was draped over the other jump seat.

"Done," Mandy promised, then sighed in relief as Josh searched through his coat pockets before apologizing to Herb.

"Can't seem to find it. Sorry, fella," he said, leaning back once more and sliding an arm around Mandy's shoulders. "Hey," he added, looking out the window, purposely changing the subject, "I think we're almost there. Lois, did you say the Tropicana is right on the boardwalk?"

As the director pulled a brochure out of her briefcase and began reading

aloud about the hotel, Mandy leaned closer to look up into Josh's face and whisper, "Truce?"

Josh looked down at her, seeing the apprehension in her innocent green eyes. Apprehension, and something else. Unless he missed his guess, Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine liked him in spite of herself. He suppressed a wince as his guilty conscience gave him a sharp poke right between the shoulder blades.

He had to keep it light, keep their relationship strictly on the surface. Mandy was better off fighting with him than she was believing he was one of the good guys. "Truce?" he repeated, leaning down to whisper in her ear. "Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin, sweetheart."

Watching as her green eyes clouded over with pain, Josh was at a loss to explain why he suddenly felt more than a little injured himself.

THE CONCIERGE suite at the Tropicana was everything Mandy had expected, and quite a bit more. It was on two levels, for one thing, consisting of a formal sitting room that connected with the bedroom area by way of a spiral staircase. With the couch on one floor and the king-size bed on another, Mandy could see no reason for any problems, if only Joe would promise to behave himself.

She walked around the two-level suite, admiring the floral carpets and inspecting what looked to be original oil paintings hanging in a cluster above the couch. Wait until he sees the bathroom, she thought, standing in front of the huge wall of windows that overlooked the boardwalk. A person could float a battleship in that tub. Not that Joe would think that. Oh, no, he'll probably make some ridiculous sug-

gestion about bathing together to save water or something like that.

She walked over to the credenza to inspect the cleverly arranged fruit tray the hotel management had sent up along with a complimentary bottle of wine. "Have an apple, Mandy," she suggested. "Maybe an apple a day will keep the bully away."

"Ah, yes, Amanda Elizabeth, but will it keep the wolf away?" She whirled around sharply, her movement jostling the fruit on the tray.

"Oh, look what you made me do!" she accused as the fruit went tumbling to the floor.

Josh's shoulders shook with silent laughter. "Just having a little Mandy-to-Mandy chat, were you? Did you ever consider outside help?" he asked, bending down to pick up an orange before walking over to stand in front of Mandy. "Yours, I believe."

Mandy snatched the orange out of his hand and angrily slammed it down on the silver tray, which immediately flipped into the air like a giant silver tiddlywink before doing a graceful swan dive to the floor, giving Joe's ankle a glancing blow on its way down. "Damn it all to hell, woman," he swore, falling to the carpet at her feet, "are you trying to kill me?"

Mandy just went on picking up the fallen fruit and piling it on the fallen tray.

"Well? Are you?" Joe repeated.

She looked up, blinking her wide green eyes. "Sorry. I had assumed it to be a rhetorical question."

Josh narrowed his eyes and made a respectful grimace. "Touché, Amanda. I guess I've been coming on a little too strong today, huh?"

"Do the words 'Mack truck' ring a bell with you?"

He put out his hand. "I was doing it for your own good, you know." He

looked down into those damned innocent green eyes and felt his stomach sink to his toes. How could he tell her she had to remain immune to him or else he couldn't be held responsible for the consequences once the two of them were alone in the hotel room for the next four nights?

Josh closed his eyes for a moment, racking his brain for an easy way to say what must be said. "I don't want you to like me too much," he blurted out at last.

Josh's words stopped Mandy dead in her tracks. Her gaze traveled from his face to his toes and then back up to his face.

"You overestimate yourself, Joe," she said finally, just as he thought she was either going to laugh in his face or deliver a sharp slap to his cheek.

With that, Mandy walked leisurely to the stairs and climbed to the balcony bedroom. After a few moments Josh heard the soft closing of the bathroom door and finally let out the breath he had been holding for what had seemed to be forever.

"I think she took that fairly well, considering," he told the oil portrait over the side table. "My God," he then exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief as he realized he had just talked out loud to himself. "Now she's got me doing it!"

Upstairs, Mandy was standing just inside the bathroom. A thought struck her. "If he doesn't want me to become too involved with him, he should *chase* me, not *fight* with me. He's going about this thing all wrong!"

*

"HOW COULD YOU do that to me!"

The door had just closed on the television crew and Mandy turned to attack.

"Do what?" Josh asked innocently, moving away to turn on the television set.

"How could you order me *well-done* steak, that's what! It was like shoe leather! And I had to eat it, didn't I? It was either that or let Lois and the rest of them know that my dearest 'husband' doesn't have even the faintest idea as to how I like my steak cooked." Mandy stomped over to the couch and threw herself down in a huff. "I know what you were doing, you know."

Josh turned to peer at her inquisitively. "You do, do you?"

"Yes, mister smarty-pants, I do." Mandy was marvelous in a fury. "You were punishing me for trying to learn something about Herb over dinner. You remember Herb, don't you? The cameraman you told me you were here to investigate? What's the matter? Didn't you think I could even ask him a simple question without giving the game away?"

"You're feeling insulted, aren't you, Amanda Elizabeth?" Josh deduced maddeningly. "I know!" he announced, beaming at her cheerfully. "I'll go down to the hotel shops and buy you a trench coat. Would you like a thirty-eight special, too? No," he said quickly, as Mandy's eyes seemed to shoot daggers at him, "I don't think you'd look good in a shoulder holster. It'd give you bulges in all the wrong places. I like your bulges where they are now."

Jumping to her feet, Mandy began pacing rapidly around the room, her arms flapping like the wings of a flightless bird in her agitation. "That's right, make jokes. Ha, ha, very funny. You ought to go on the stage, Joe whatever-your-name-is, you know that? You could—"

Josh cut off her tirade by going up to her and physically trapping her arms at her sides. "You're getting hysterical again, Mandy, just like in the elevator," he told her as she tried to wriggle out of his grasp.

"So? What are you going to do about it, big man? Give me that tired old 'that's how they do it in Hollywood' line again?"

The movement of her body against his chest was making a mockery of all his good intentions. He bent down and effortlessly hoisted her into his arms. The two of them landed on the soft cushions of the couch a second later, Mandy clinging tightly to his neck as he followed her down, capturing her mouth with his own.

She was sweetness; she was fire; she was as intoxicating and addicting as strong drink. His mouth moved over hers; his lips drank from hers; his tongue tasted hers. He wanted more, still more. He wanted it all—everything she was willing to give.

And she was giving and taking with all the passion her red hair and fiery nature allowed.

"You drive me crazy, lady," Josh confessed.

Mandy looked up into the eyes scant inches from her own. Clearly she had better get this situation back under control. "I drive you crazy?" she quipped, turning her head away. "I'd be flattered, if I didn't know that it's such a short trip."

His maddening lopsided grin came into view as Josh slowly disengaged himself from Mandy and slid away from her.

"Where—where are you going?" Mandy asked as Josh got up and started across the room.

"I'm going to take a shower," Josh growled. "A cold shower."

She watched him until his legs disappeared at the top of the stairs, then sat up, guiltily straightening her wrinkled skirt and blouse. "Good thought," she mused aloud. Then she spied the complimentary bottle of wine, still cooling in the ice bucket and, although she rarely drank, decided it was as good a time as any for a medicinal dose of alcohol.

MANDY STOOD quietly before the huge windows in the living room, pretending to enjoy the sunrise, but her eyes were closed against the pain she felt clutch at her chest. Josh was making no bones about the fact that once the honeymoon and his investigation were over he planned to walk away from her, heart-whole and guilt-free.

At least he was being flattering, letting her know that he was attracted to her, even if it was only a physical attraction. After all, what else could it be, she reasoned sadly, considering the fact that he didn't hide his opinion that she didn't really have both her oars in the water.

"He's not exactly my fantasy prince come riding into my life on his snow-white stallion, either," she explained ruefully to the rising sun. "He's rude, arrogant, conceited, a terrible tease—and much too secretive. Even if he does have the sexiest blue eyes I've ever seen." She was silent for a moment. "Even if his kisses turn my whole world inside out and his body—oh, damn, that must be the coffee!"

The firm rapping on the door of the suite interrupted Mandy's musings.

"Good morning!" the waiter exclaimed cheerily, carrying in a heavy silver tray. "Hey, you're the newlyweds who won that contest, aren't you?" he asked, snapping his fingers as if he'd just remembered that fact. "I

saw the film crew come in with you yesterday. What a break. I'm an actor, you know. If I had known I could get television exposure as easily as you have, I'd have dragged my girlfriend Sylvia off to City Hall in a flash. I'm Rollie, by the way."

His enthusiasm was infectious, and Mandy found she was smiling in spite of herself.

"This could be your big break, you know, if you work it right. With that red hair and those great legs, hey, you could be the next Lucy. Can you take a pratfall?"

Mandy screwed up her face in confusion. "A pratfall? I'm not sure. What is it?"

Rollie ran up several steps of the spiral staircase. He turned and assumed an air of sophisticated elegance. Head held high, he then began his descent, before seeming to slip on the third step from the bottom, a hilarious look of astonishment widening his expressive eyes. He somersaulted comically down the remainder of the stairs.

"That's a pratfall," he announced, glowing. "Pretty good, huh?"

Above their heads, Mandy could hear the sound of running feet, and within seconds Josh was racing down the stairs, a huge bath sheet wrapped around him from his waist to his ankles, his face covered neck to nose with a heavy coating of shaving cream. "Mandy!" he shouted. "Are you all right, honey?"

Mandy opened her mouth to answer him, but suddenly Josh lost his own footing, and within the blinking of an eye he was somersaulting down the last three stairs, doing a grand imitation of Rollie, if only he knew it.

"Oh, Joe," she wailed, falling to her knees. "Are you all right?"

"Never mind me, damn it. Are you all right? That's the only thing that's important."

He was so serious, so very concerned, that it tugged on Mandy's heartstrings. Unfortunately, he was also the funniest thing Mandy had seen in years.

She tried to speak. "You thought . . . and then you . . . oh, you look so *funny*! I didn't . . . it was him," she said between bouts of laughter.

"Who him? Him who?" Josh looked up, suddenly aware that they were not alone. Rollie gave Josh a wincingly bright grin and a jaunty salute.

Josh closed his eyes and counted to ten. He had been right: God *was* getting him.

"Rollie's going to be an actor, you see," Mandy pressed on, her words tumbling over themselves. "He showed me a pratfall. That's the noise you heard. You did it just like him." Mandy began giggling all over again.

Josh shrugged Mandy's arm away and stood. "Rollie," he said with great dignity, considering he was standing in the living room looking like a clown who had run amok in a nudist camp. "Good luck with your career. Come back later, and we'll see if the director can find a place for you in the filming, okay?"

Rollie's jaw dropped open. "You're kidding!" he exclaimed, hardly believing his good luck. "No, you're not kidding, are you? Hey, you're all right, sir." He fairly danced his way to the door, laughing as he declined the tip Mandy was holding out for him.

Once the door had closed behind the ecstatic waiter, Mandy turned to look at Josh, who was already on his way back up the stairs. "Hey," she called, stopping him in his tracks. "You're all right, you know. Under those designer

clothes you wear beats a heart of pure marshmallow."

Leaning on the banister, Josh let his chin drop onto his chest in relief. Relief and the sudden realization that Mandy's words made him feel that the whole incident had been worth it, just to have gained her approval.

BY MIDAFTERNOON Mandy was thoroughly disenchanted with the wonderful worlds of acting and television. Filming, she had discovered to her dismay, consisted more of standing around and waiting than it did of actually performing in front of the camera.

"Mandy," Lois said, waving her on her way without even turning around. "You need some more makeup, unless you want to look like a ghost on camera."

"Put the makeup on until you think you should be out walking the streets, Mandy," Chuck put in encouragingly.

In the end, Lois had to wield the makeup brush herself, as Mandy still hadn't made her cheeks pink enough to suit the director. The filming, which consisted of nothing more than a repeated panning of the room as Mandy and Josh sat on the couch holding hands and smiling like village idiots, was at last completed.

"That's it?" Mandy squeaked incredulously as the hot lights were finally turned off. "All that carrying on for five puny minutes of film? I don't believe it!"

"Now, now, darling, temper, temper," Josh soothed. "Go upstairs like a good little bride and scrub that gunk off your face so I can take you to dinner."

The phone in the suite rang then, causing Lois to say that it must be her station calling her about something

important. But the call was for "Joe Tremaine."

Mandy went part of the way up the stairs before she heard her "husband" say into the phone, "Joe Tremaine here," and was struck by a sudden curiosity as to the identity of Joe's caller. Racing up the rest of the steps, she threw herself down on the large bed, took a deep breath, and carefully lifted the receiver of the bedside phone.

"So, Joe, how's it going?" she heard a deep, skeptical voice ask.

"The weather's quite warm here, Dad, and I believe it may even get hotter." Mandy made a face at the receiver. "Dad!" she mouthed silently. What a ridiculous code name for an investigator.

"How much longer do you intend to be gone?" the man asked. "Vic Harrison has been asking some pretty probing questions around the studio. As a matter of fact, I have a few rather probing questions of my own for you, Mr. Tremaine."

"Give me a couple more days, Dad, then I'll have everything I need to take care of that little business we talked about in your office the other night, okay? Just cut me some slack. If there's no emergency, you shouldn't have called. Bye now."

"Don't you hang up on me, you scoundrel!" the other voice yelled into the phone. "Josh? Answer me, damn it! Josh!"

Mandy set the phone down quietly. "Josh," she breathed softly. "I like it."

THE FOOTAGE of the two happy newlyweds strolling down the boardwalk that night gazing soulfully into each other's eyes had required an hour of setup time and seven takes.

But finally the filming was over. Josh had waved the crew on their way.

He looked down at Mandy, his warm breath fanning her cheek. "You want to go back to the hotel?"

Mandy closed her eyes a second, savoring his closeness. "No," she answered. "I want to walk along the boardwalk."

And walk they did, up and down the crowded boardwalk. They stopped several times to look into shop windows, selecting outlandish presents for everyone they knew.

At midnight, they walked across the width of the boardwalk to stand at the railing along a deserted stretch of the beach, looking out over the ocean.

"What have you found out so far about Herb?" Mandy asked. "He seems rather closemouthed, doesn't he?" Her voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. "Do you think Vic Harrison is involved? I know you denied it before, but then when I heard—" Mandy stopped talking, cutting off her words in mid-fantasy.

"Mandy?" he said, noticing her tightly closed lips. "You were eavesdropping from the bedroom earlier when I talked to my—"

"Dad?" she said on a sneer. "Really, Joe, surely you could have worked out a better code name than that."

Josh raised his eyebrows and stared at her, hardly believing his luck. Bless her beautiful, twisted logic.

Mandy whirled on her heels and made to walk away from the railing, but Josh was too quick for her, gathering her into his arms and pulling her back against the railing. "I think I'm beginning to fall in love with you, Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine."

Mandy melted against his lean, hard frame. "You—you don't really know anything about me. And, well, you can hardly say I know anything about you.

I like you, honestly I do." She closed her eyes with a sigh. "Very much. But I wasn't born a nursery school teacher, you know."

He could feel her stiffening in his arms before she actually pulled away.

When Mandy turned around, tears were standing in the corners of her eyes. "Until we can be completely honest with each other, I think it's best if we continue on as we were."

Mandy was right, he was going too fast. It wasn't just *his* past that concerned her; of that he was sure. Maybe she was just as disenchanted with her grandfather as he was—after all, she had run away from their home more than three years ago without leaving a trace. It had been the talk of the town for a while, Mandy's disappearance. That, and the incident with Dave Benjamin that had occurred the same week.

He shook his head, looking away from the dark ocean and straight into her eyes. "You're right," he confided softly. "I think it's time we called it a night."

MANDY LAY in the middle of the huge bed as moonlight streamed in through the large picture windows.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," Josh had said, and she could still hear his low, husky voice.

Love didn't grow in such a short time, did it? Especially love between two people who really knew less than nothing about each other?

And if he did know everything about me, about Grandfather and my involvement with Dave, would he still think he loved me then? A tear rolled down her cheek. Because I do love him, very, very much. Would he be happy that I loved him, or would he

run from me as fast as his legs could carry him?

While Mandy wrestled with her demons in the dark bedroom at the top of the spiral staircase, Josh lay on the pulled-out couch in the living room, trying to decide what he should do next. "Making a clean breast of things might not be such a bad idea, Phillips," he mused aloud.

"Then what, Phillips? You'd still have to tell her about the plot to revenge yourself on old Alexander Tremaine for what he did to Dave Benjamin. How you were going to send old Alexander Tremaine a videotape of you and his missing granddaughter cavorting in sin in Atlantic City, just so he could sit in his castle and turn purple with rage. How were you planning to drop that little bomb and still convince her you love her?"

*

No, NO, NO! Mandy, you're still doing it all wrong. You're too tense." Lois Lamour waved her hands in barely controlled anger.

"I'm really sorry, Lois," Mandy said, swallowing down hard on her anger. "It's just—it's just so *staged*. I mean, whoever heard of a couple having breakfast in bed while a waiter hovers over them?"

"Hey, I'm playing my role right!" Rollie protested, straightening his bow tie as he stood beside the bed, coffee-pot at the ready. "Besides, Mr. Tremaine here promised me this part."

"Yes, darling," Josh said as he sat close beside her in the middle of the bed. Josh withdrew his hand—the one that had just slipped under the covers to reach over and tickle her rib cage. Josh looked at Mandy's flushed cheeks and sparkling green eyes. "And Rol-

lie's looking for an Academy Award," he added, a smile hovering on his lips.

The scene was finally completed without a hitch, and Josh actually found himself looking forward to the filming inside the casino.

Lois agreed that the Fruit Market seemed an ideal location for the scene she had planned, and soon Josh and Mandy were standing side by side in front of two slot machines, large cups full of quarters at the ready.

Mandy dropped quarter after quarter in the slot and watched the pictures of fruit spinning around dizzily before coming to a halt.

A ringing sound caught her attention and a yellow light on top of her machine began blinking as it registered a win. Then she heard the clinking of quarters as the metal tray located at the bottom of the machine began filling with coins. "Oh, my God," she shrieked excitedly, looking down at the cup, "I won!"

As she spoke she was scooping the quarters into her cup, her fingers trembling with excitement. "I'm on a roll, I can feel it."

She grinned at Josh playfully, then slipped five more quarters into her machine.

Mandy and Josh played the slot machines in the Fruit Market until Lois at last thought they had gotten enough good film to call a halt. "Mandy," Josh urged, when she didn't seem to hear Lois's okay to stop the action, "you can stop now, the camera's off. Mandy. Mandy?"

But Mandy wasn't listening. Her entire being was concentrating on feeding quarters into the machine.

"Looks like she's hooked," Chuck offered.

Josh thanked the technician for his warning, then waved the crew on their way before turning back to take hold

of Mandy's arm just as she was about to drop another load of quarters into the slot. "You want to walk around for a while?"

Picking up both of their cups, Josh nodded his head encouragingly in the direction of nearby Jackpot Lane.

Mandy played the slot machines at random as they walked along, laughing at the comical graphics that took the place of whirling fruit on the "knockout jackpot" machines in Cherry Court, and making jokes about playing the "lazy man's slots" as she fed quarters into the automated machines that had no pull handles to test her strength.

"They make losing your money too easy," she decided after putting a few dollars into a video poker machine in Tropicana Gardens.

"Had enough, Miss High Roller, or do you want me to buy you a green visor so you can try your luck at the blackjack tables in the main casino?" he asked.

Mandy looked at Josh consideringly. "You've had enough, haven't you, Joe? Why didn't you stop me?"

He pulled her close to give her a quick hug. "I've had a great time watching you have a great time, my love, that's why. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Happy?"

"Very happy," she breathed, fascinated with the way Josh's tanned skin crinkled so sexily at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. "I honestly can't remember the last time I had this much fun. You know, I've hardly been anywhere in years," she mused, almost to herself. Then, as she saw the question coming into his eyes, she rushed on, "I mean, I've been so busy at the nursery school, you understand, that—"

"That even a pretend honeymoon with a make-believe husband, all put to music with a hovering film crew and a

secret investigation, is to be considered a treat," he ended, slowly losing his smile.

He wasn't ready to hear why she was living in such straitened circumstances in Allentown when she could be riding high on the hog in Southampton with Alexander Tremaine. He'd rather concentrate on the Mandy Tremaine who lived in a third-floor walk-up apartment and taught nursery school.

They stood close together in the middle of the wide balcony as hopeful gamblers and casino personnel detoured around them unnoticed. "I can't think of any place I'd rather be, or anyone else I'd rather have here with me, *Josh*." Her emerald eyes opened wide as they searched for his reaction.

"You know who I am?" he asked, his arms tightening about her waist.

"After you hung up the phone yesterday afternoon the man you called Dad said your name—he yelled it, actually. I don't think he's too overjoyed with you right now, *Josh*," she ended, slowly sliding her hands up around his neck.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I tell you? You've never asked for my life story."

"You're one remarkable lady, Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine," he whispered.

Mandy closed her eyes. No, I'm not, she wanted to scream. I'm only being this way because then I won't have to return the favor and tell you all about *me*. About my past—about my grandfather's destruction of Dave Benjamin, or the part I played in the whole sordid mess. Oh, *Josh*, why can't we just stay here in Atlantic City forever, and let time stand still? "You're not so bad yourself, fella," she murmured against his chest while she blinked back tears.

And then, in the middle of the Flight Deck, with hundreds of people passing by on either side, they shared a kiss that proved not all the ringing bells and flashing lights in Slot City came with a price tag attached.

Or did they?

I don't think I'm falling in love with her, he told himself with a vehemence that startled him, *I am* in love with her. I, Joshua Mark Phillips, am hopelessly, madly, and passionately in love with Amanda Elizabeth Tremaine. I am going to throw her over my shoulder and carry her off to the nearest justice of the peace just as fast as I can.

And what about your plans for the videotape? his conscience asked, stopping him in his tracks. Are you going to tell her how you planned to send a copy of it to old Alexander Tremaine to punish him with the certain knowledge that you, one of Dave Benjamin's friends, was bedding down with his only granddaughter?

I'm also going to cross my fingers and lie like hell, hoping she'll never learn about those other plans.

THE LIVING ROOM was in darkness. Mandy could smell his spicy aftershave, feel the strong, even beating of his heart.

Josh had been holding her in a loose embrace, enjoying the faint tickle of her burnished curls as he lowered his head slightly to bury his face in their silky warmth. Josh was lost, totally and completely lost. His entire world consisted of the beautiful woman he held so tenderly in his arms: Mandy of the emerald green eyes and the innocent, trusting heart. He wanted to pull her hard against his chest and crush her mouth with his own.

Josh took Mandy's hand and held it close between them as he drew her

more firmly into his embrace. "Alone at last," he breathed into her ear.

Her moist lips slightly parted. "And do you plan to have your wicked way with me then, sir?"

The slow, lopsided grin she had learned to love appeared then as Josh let go of her hand, slipped his arm under her knees and lifted her high against his chest. "Shut up, woman, and point me toward the stairs," he answered, nuzzling her neck.

Mandy's arms held him tightly as she buried her flaming cheeks against his shoulder. "I love you, Josh whatever-your-name-is," she whispered.

Josh stopped, his foot on the bottom step of the spiral staircase. "It's Josh Phillips, Ms. Amanda Elizabeth soon-to-be Phillips. And I love you, too—more than I thought it was possible to love anyone."

"If that's a proposal, Mr. Phillips, I accept," Mandy answered quietly, leaning forward to press a soft, tantalizing kiss on his neck.

Josh moved to ascend the staircase.

"WHAT IN BLUE blazes is going on in here? Joshua! Damn it, Josh, where are you?"

Josh froze in his tracks. It couldn't be his father. Not now, for God's sake. His arms tightened instinctively around Mandy.

Matthew Phillips located the switch just inside the door, and the living room was flooded with light. His gaze caught sight of the redheaded young woman clinging fearfully to his son.

"I can only hope I got here in time. I'm Matthew Phillips, Ms. Tremaine," he offered, holding out his hand as he crossed the room. "Joshua's father, I'm ashamed to say. I think it's time we all had a little talk," he

urged, holding out his arm and gesturing toward the couch on the other side of the room.

Mandy slipped from Josh's arms and went to perch nervously on the edge of the couch. Josh looks just like him, Mandy thought numbly. Is this how Josh will look in thirty years?

"You've got the floor," she heard Josh say in a strange, tight voice.

"Mr. Phillips," she cut in nervously, "is it something about the investigation? I know Josh didn't get too far with it here in Atlantic City, but he really has been working hard."

"I'll bet he has," Matt slid in nastily.

Mandy ignored the interruption to continue: "Josh thinks Herb is only a small part of a larger plan, and as soon as we return to Allentown he'll be able to locate the higher-ups. Isn't that right, Josh?" she asked, turning to him, hoping he'd say something—anything.

"Investigation, Josh?" his father repeated, at last dropping into a chair. "My, you have been a busy fellow haven't you, son?"

Mandy's heart sank to her toes. "There isn't any investigation, Josh, is there?" she asked brokenly. "Herb's just a cameraman, isn't he?"

"Who's Herb?" Matt put in, then waved his hand to negate the question. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Josh crossed the room and sat down beside Mandy, taking her suddenly cold hands between his own.

"WILL YOU KINDLY move your miserable, lying self out of my way, please?"

"For crying out loud, Mandy, stop this," Josh pleaded, going over to the bed and the open suitcase that lay

there, closing the case with a determined snap.

Mandy picked up the suitcase and began filling it with toiletries. "Tell me, Mr. Phillips of Southampton, Allentown and all points east, did you have Herb set up a secret camera in here, just so you could be sure to catch *all* the action?" She looked around the room, hunting for a hidden camera hanging from the ceiling.

"You know damn well I wouldn't do that!"

"How should I? I really don't know anything about you, Josh, do I?" She went over to the dresser and opened the top drawer, filling her hands with delicate undergarments. She began slamming the clothing into the suitcase. "I do know you're a low, conniving, lying—"

Josh grabbed up the undergarments, flinging them across the room.

"Mandy—darling—listen to reason," he begged as she crouched on the floor, picking up the clothing he had thrown. He swung away from her to slam a fist against the wall. "I could kill my father for telling you the way he did. If he had just phoned and confronted me with what he thought, I could have told him that I never would have used that tape. It was a stupid idea in the first place—I wasn't thinking clearly. I'd never consciously hurt you, Mandy, please believe that."

She pulled the second dresser drawer out entirely and walked to the bed, dumping the drawer's contents into the suitcase, then dropped the drawer an inch from Josh's foot. "Believe that?" she snorted.

Ever since his father had explained how he had finally made the connection between the extra first prize in the contest and the telephone number of the Tropicana, Mandy had not been

thinking, she had been reacting. Not that Josh could blame her.

Giving Josh one last scathing look, she took up her purse and rapidly descended the stairs to the living room, leaving Josh where he stood.

"Hello, room service? This is Mrs. Tremaine," Mandy was saying into the phone as Josh came within earshot. "I desire a bottle of your finest champagne—no, make that *two* bottles—well chilled, and your best imported caviar," she commanded regally. "Just make sure Rollie Estrada brings it, do you understand?"

A small smile curved her lips. "Thank you so much," she replied coldly before slamming the phone back down on its cradle.

"Mandy—" Josh began, only to be interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. "Damn it!" he swore, throwing his hands in the air. "Nobody can move that fast!"

"Open this door, Joshua!" came the muted shout from the hallway. Josh spread his hands wide, palms up, as if to say, "Why the hell not?" and went to throw the door wide open.

Matt Phillips stormed into the room looking slightly disheveled.

Josh angrily ran a hand through his hair and flung himself down into a chair. "What are you back for, anyway? Haven't you done enough already?"

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Matt commanded sternly, looking at Mandy and realizing the slender hold the young woman had on her emotions. "Mandy?" he asked softly, taking a tentative step in her direction. "Is there anything I can do? Any place I can take you?"

Mandy looked at each of the Phillips men in turn, her narrowed eyes two chips of emerald ice. "I wouldn't cross the street with either of you!" she spat,

going to answer the jaunty rapping at the door to allow Rollie, pushing a trolley holding two silver ice buckets and a huge domed serving platter, into the room.

"You guys planning on having a party or something?"

Josh rose to go over and put a detaining hand on Mandy's arm as she hoisted her purse to her shoulder, clearly intent on leaving. "Mandy, you can't just walk out on me like this," he implored, keeping his voice low.

"Just watch me, buster," she shot back, shrugging off his hand. "Your celebration feast has arrived—ordered by the victim herself. Have a ball!"

Pulling her stiff, resisting body into his arms, Josh went on, unheeding. "I gave up the idea of revenge almost as soon as I thought it up, Mandy, I swear it. I love you. Deep down inside—under all that hurt you're feeling right now—you know I love you. Please don't leave, Mandy, please."

With a heartrending sob, Mandy tore herself out of Josh's arms and ran for the door. "Rollie!" she called to the waiter, who was just uncorking the first bottle of champagne. "Take me to the nearest bus station. *Please!*"

The door to the hall had already closed behind Mandy, and Josh knew she wasn't coming back. Reaching into his pocket, he drew out a small stack of bills and thrust them into the waiter's hand. "Stay with her until the bus leaves, Rollie. Can you do that for me, friend?"

Rollie saw the naked pain in Josh's eyes. "Sure thing, buddy," he told him solemnly. "She'll never be out of my sight for a minute, I promise."

Josh stood looking at the closed door.

*

IT WAS DARK in the back of the bus, so dark that few people noticed the young woman huddled in the window seat, her legs tucked under her as she sniffled quietly into her handkerchief.

The full load of casino-goers exchanged stories of their exploits in the various casinos as the bus rumbled along the Atlantic City Expressway, either bragging of their winnings or complaining over their losses.

"Hey, little lady," said one of the happier gamblers, leaning across the aisle to get Mandy's attention. "Nothing can be that bad, can it? You saved enough for the bus ride home, didn't you? After all, how much could a little girl have lost in one trip, anyway?"

"Not much," Mandy whispered, too quietly for the man to hear her. "Only my heart."

THE ONLY SOUND that broke the silence of her apartment on the long, lonely nights was the sound of her own weeping.

She had tried filling a few of those long evening hours by looking through the newspapers that had accumulated in her absence, only to open the financial section in one of them to see a grainy picture of Matthew Phillips staring out at her. "Phillips, Inc. Opts For The Media" the headline read, with the copy beneath the picture detailing the company's purchase of WFML's radio and television stations and giving both Matt's and Josh's names as the chief stockholders.

The story must have been released sometime after they had left for Atlantic City, she realized. Phillips, Inc. maintained holdings in Basking Ridge as well as just outside Southampton,

Long Island and many other towns in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. Josh had been working alongside his father ever since his graduation from Yale.

Dave Benjamin had gone to Yale, although he had dropped out in his junior year. Maybe that's when he and Josh first met, she had thought as she read the story.

The friend he had cared about enough to concoct his scheme for revenge had nearly died because of her.

Mandy shook her head, bringing herself back to reality. She gathered up the small mountain of papers and shuffled barefoot toward the garbage can in the kitchen. She stepped on the foot pedal that controlled the top of the can and dropped the papers inside, then let the lid drop with a bang.

That's funny, she thought, sniffing self-pityingly as she stared at the lid. I didn't think it made that thumping sound when it closed.

As she began to make her way to the living room, she heard the thumping sound again. Slapping a hand to her head she skidded around the corner and flung open the door.

"Josh," she breathed, closing her eyes in mingled apprehension and relief. She motioned with a wave of her hand that he should come in and sit down. "I thought you were the garbage-can lid."

Seating himself on the couch, Josh looked up at her, a sad smile on his face. "Why do I get the feeling Sigmund Freud would have a field day with that comparison?"

Mandy looked down at the floor, nervously kicking the fringed end of her small imitation Oriental carpet with one bare foot.

"Rollie damn near took my head off for making you run away. They all like

you a lot, Mandy. Herb said to tell you that you looked great on tape."

Mentioning the videotape was a truly brilliant move, Phillips, Josh told himself angrily as he watched the deep pink flush creep up Mandy's neck and into her cheeks.

"Look, Mandy, I didn't come here to talk about the film crew. I came to apolo—"

Mandy cut in hurriedly. "There's really no need, Josh. I understand why you did what you did. I'm just sorry that you did it all for nothing. Grandfather couldn't care less what I do, or who I do it with. You see, he disowned me more than three years ago."

Josh's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Disowned you? What the hell are you talking about, Mandy? He couldn't have disowned you. You disappeared without a trace. Tremaine made a big thing about it at the time, said he had private detectives out looking for you."

Mandy gave a wry laugh. "He knows where I am, Josh."

Josh ran a hand through his hair, trying hard to understand. "I don't get it. Why?"

This is it, Mandy, she told herself. This is where you watch Josh's love for you turn into ashes. "Grandfather disowned me because I accused him of trying to kill Dave Benjamin, even if I knew it wasn't entirely true." She took a deep breath and said the rest in a rush of words. "You see, Josh, I destroyed Dave, just as surely as if I was the one who ruined his company."

Mandy went over to stare out of the window overlooking the street, unable to look at Josh.

"Mandy... darling," he began hesitantly, "Dave Benjamin tried to commit suicide when his business went sour. You didn't have anything to do with it."

She whirled around to face him. "Oh, no? My grandfather purposely set out to ruin Dave because he didn't think Dave was good enough for his precious granddaughter. Dave told me all about it." She laughed almost hysterically before ending with a sob, "And I didn't even love Dave. I never intended to marry him. It was all for nothing."

She shook her head, her eyes shut tight against the condemnation she was sure she would see in Josh's face. "I couldn't face it, so I ran away with my tail between my legs. Grandfather's last words to me were to warn me not to come back until I grew up. *Oh, God!*"

Josh drew her unresisting body into his arms, cradling her against his chest as she broke into loud sobs. He didn't understand this, didn't understand it at all. Dave had never mentioned Mandy to him when they had occasionally met for lunch before his college friend had suffered his breakdown. Dave had only ranted and raved and cursed the greedy, power-mad Alexander Tremaine for deliberately running his company into bankruptcy.

Surely Mandy was blaming herself for something that wasn't her fault. And had been blaming herself for more than three years, he reminded himself with a grimace.

Still holding her tight against him, he walked toward the couch and gently helped her to sit down. "Mandy," he urged, trying hard to lift her head from his chest, "you didn't destroy anybody. What did your grandfather say when you asked him about Dave?"

Mandy sat up and sniffed a time or two. "I—I never did ask him," she admitted, blowing her nose. "I only

saw him once after Dave's breakdown, and that was to tell him that I knew what he had done. He didn't deny it, Josh." She looked up at him with tear-drenched eyes.

"So you ran away," Josh ended for her, using his own handkerchief to dab away her tears.

"And I ran away from you five days ago. I guess I'm consistent. Right?"

Josh looked down at her, his slow lopsided grin making her heart do little flip-flops in her breast. "And here I was wondering how I could bring up the subject without having my head handed to me on a platter. You do know, Amanda Elizabeth, that the time has come to stop running?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, my dearest love, that you and I are going to drive up to Southampton tomorrow to beard old Alexander Tremaine in his den. It's time you laid all your old ghosts to rest so that we can get on with our lives—together."

Putting a finger under her chin to lift her head so that she was looking straight into his eyes, Josh said solemnly, "Now, come here. We have some catching up to do. I believe we were in the middle of something rather important when my dear father interrupted us...."

*

ALEXANDER TREMAINE had built his estate on the near outskirts of Southampton. "I still think we should have phoned ahead," Josh said, looking at his watch and seeing that it was only four in the afternoon. "He may not be home."

Mandy giggled nervously. "Grandfather will be home. He hasn't stayed at his office past two-thirty in twenty years. Since my parents died, in fact."

Alexander Tremaine really built himself quite a house, Josh thought as he pulled the car to a halt in front of the great oaken door of the Tudor mansion. It was only as he was extracting the key from the ignition that he realized that Mandy still hadn't unbuckled her seat belt. She was sitting rock still, staring at the concrete steps in front of the mansion.

"That—that's where I found Dave," she told him softly, before averting her eyes to stare straight ahead. "For a moment I thought I could still see him lying there. Silly, isn't it?"

Josh went around to open Mandy's door. Holding out his hand to her, he silently bid her to come with him.

"Miss Amanda," the middle-aged man Josh took for the butler said when he answered their knock, showing no surprise at her presence after such a long absence. "Mr. Tremaine is in his study, as you'd know."

"Yes, thank you, Farnsworth," she answered, reaching for Josh's hand as she began walking toward the back of the house.

Then they were at the end of the hall and the butler was holding the study door open for them so they could enter. Mandy went first, stopping only a few steps inside the door, Josh close behind her.

The room looked like the law library of some old established Philadelphia firm, Josh decided, his gaze traveling over the book-lined walls to finally focus on the huge mahogany desk that sat in front of the velvet-draped windows.

The man who sat behind the desk just looked old, old and wrinkled and tired.

"I told you I didn't want that damned medicine, Farnsworth," the old man growled without looking up, "so you can just take it back to wherever you got it from."

"It's not Farnsworth, Grandfather," Mandy explained, moving another tentative step into the room. "It's me, Mandy."

Alexander Tremaine looked up over his half-frame reading glasses. "Who's that with you?"

"My name is Joshua Phillips, sir," Josh explained, stepping past Mandy to walk over to the desk, his right hand extended. He held it out long enough to count slowly to ten, and then let it drop to his side.

"I know who you are, Phillips, and what you and my granddaughter have been up to," Tremaine informed them, leaning back in his oversize leather chair. "According to this report in front of me, it would appear Amanda is just as naive and foolish as she was the day she left me—*here*." He looked Josh up and down. "Playing house with my granddaughter, were you? How much will it cost me this time?"

Mandy forgot her fears as she raced to Josh's side. "Josh and I are going to be married, Grandfather," she put in firmly. "I won't allow you to talk to him that way, do you understand?"

"You *won't* allow it, will you, missy!" Tremaine exploded, rising to his feet. "Do you have any idea what it cost me the last time? Half a million dollars, that's what, and then the cowardly fool goes and pretends to blow his head off on my doorstep when it wasn't enough, so that I've been footing the bill at that fancy private hospital for three years while he chases the nurses. Not that I care about that, because I don't. But he really made me pay, didn't he, when you left me?"

Mandy stood there wide-eyed, slowly shaking her head back and forth, as the truth finally hit her. "You paid Dave Benjamin to stay away from me? But I thought you forced him into bankruptcy. Grandfather, I don't understand."

Josh stood quietly beside Mandy, thinking hard. "Dave was lying all along, wasn't he, Mr. Tremaine? He lied to you about the depth of his involvement with Mandy, and to Mandy about the reason for his money problems. And when the money you gave him still wasn't enough, he faked a public suicide so that he could be put in an institution away from his creditors. What was it—gambling?"

Alexander Tremaine looked at Josh with dawning respect. "Maybe you're not as dumb as you look, pretty boy. Although only a woman would believe a person could try to blow his brains out at point-blank range and end up with a flesh wound that didn't even need stitches! Dave Benjamin is about as crazy as a fox."

"Yet you're paying for his hospitalization," Josh remarked, winking at the older man. "Why do I get the feeling you're not as bad as your press paints you?"

"My investigator says you're half of Phillips, Inc.," Tremaine said, changing the subject. "Tell me, do you hold up your own end, or are you just another daddy's boy?"

Josh smiled broadly, slipping his arm around Mandy's shoulders and pulling her close. "I can run rings around you any day, old man, if you push me. Does that answer your question?"

The older man threw back his head and laughed a dry, papery sound. "Mandy, I think you can keep this one," he said approvingly.

But Mandy was still trying to understand exactly what had happened three years ago.

"Why did you let me leave?" she asked finally, putting her thoughts into words. "I know you never liked me much, but I didn't think you hated me."

"You were *sulking*, child, just like you always did, turning the whole sordid mess into trashy melodrama, with yourself cast in Joan Crawford's role." He turned to Josh, confiding good-naturedly, "She was always a dreamer, weaving fantasies in her head. I was the Black Prince, I believe, ever the villain. But she's got a good head on her shoulders. I knew she'd be back one of these days—when she grew up."

Mandy walked around the desk. "Grandfather," she asked, her voice low with intensity, "did you ever love me—even a little?"

Josh thought Alexander Tremaine looked more old than ever as he tentatively put out a hand and stroked Mandy's cheek. "I love you enough to be willing to put up with a bunch of carrot-topped great-grandchildren, Amanda Elizabeth, if that answers your question. Hey, stop that," he warned happily, "I'm too old and frail for such treatment. Amanda Elizabeth, stop hugging me at once, do you hear!"

"Your medicine, sir," came Farnsworth's superior tones from somewhere behind Josh.

Josh looked at the butler, standing stiff and straight, a small silver tray in his hand, and then over at Mandy and her grandfather, locked together in a healing embrace. He turned to Farnsworth, a rueful smile on his face. "Mr. Tremaine has already got his medicine, Farnsworth."

ROLLIE ESTRADA softly closed the door to the Concierge suite at the plush Tropicana Hotel, his wide toothy grin very much in evidence as he pocketed

the large tip Josh had just handed him. "I do love a happy ending," he said to no one in particular before placing the Do Not Disturb sign on the doorknob.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #24
Vol. 4 No. 6**

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PHYLLIS HALLDORSON

My Heart's Undoing



Colleen's love for Erik had grown from a schoolgirl crush into the passions of a woman. But he's always thought of her as a sister. Could he ever love her the way a man should love his woman?



The column of figures blurred before Colleen's misty blue eyes. The next two days were going to be pure agony. In just forty-eight hours she was going to have to stand by with a bright smile and watch the man she'd loved for sixteen years, since she was eight, marry another woman. And not just any other woman. Erik was marrying her cousin, Brett Kendrick.

She closed her eyes and the picture that seemed to be engraved on the inside of her lids came to life. Erik Johansen, all six feet two inches of him. A blond, green-eyed Viking who still looked like the football star he'd been in college. He'd been her older brother Devin's roommate during their undergraduate years at Michigan State, and she'd been captivated from the first time Devin brought him home. In the intervening years her feelings had progressed from childish hero worship, to adolescent infatuation, to a deep and abiding love.

A voice speaking to her startled her out of her reverie, and her gaze focused on her sister-in-law and business partner, April O'Farrell. The expression on April's pretty face was one of concern. "Colleen, are you all right? You looked so—oh honestly, you never should have agreed to be Brett's maid of honor. If she'd had a shred of sensitivity she wouldn't have asked you."

April was the only other person on earth who knew about Colleen's misplaced love for Erik Johansen, and then only because Colleen had become overconfident the year before when Erik had finally discovered that

she'd grown into an attractive young woman and had begun taking her out. Not that the relationship had ever developed into much of a romance, but after several months of dating with the inevitable good-night kisses, she'd developed a glow of happiness that could no longer be hidden from April when they worked so closely together in the boutique every day.

So it was to April that Colleen had turned for comfort when Brett returned to Detroit from New York City three months before and ignited the fires of passion in Erik that made him forget everything but his desire for the tall willowy photographer's model. It was April whose shoulder bore the brunt of Colleen's tears, and April who had kept Colleen's humiliating secret.

Now Colleen found it necessary to defend Brett. "April, I appreciate your loyalty, but that's really not fair. Brett has no idea how I feel about Erik. I don't think she even realizes that we were dating on a fairly regular basis before she came back. She's been living in New York for the past ten years."

April shook her head. "Erik's an idiot. How he could possibly prefer her to you is beyond me. Brett's never been in love with anyone but herself. She's not in love, she's scared. She's been modeling for ten years, but she never hit it really big, and now her time's running out and she knows it."

Colleen's shoulders slumped as she returned to her figures.

It was almost noon when Brett phoned Colleen at the boutique. She

never identified herself when starting a telephone conversation. There was no need; no one else had such a husky, sexy voice. Only this time it was more harsh than sexy. "Colleen, I need to see you at once. Meet me at your apartment in an hour, and for God's sake don't be late. This is important."

She hung up without giving Colleen a chance to answer.

Fifty minutes later Colleen stepped off the bus outside her apartment house. The January breeze was frosty.

Brett's new red Thunderbird, a gift from Erik, was parked at the curb.

Together the women went up the stairs to Colleen's apartment. Brett paced around the three small rooms. There was an air of suppressed excitement about her that seemed at war with her anxiety.

"Brett," Colleen said, "so what's the problem that couldn't wait until we see each other tonight at the wedding rehearsal?"

"I had a call from my agent in New York this morning," Brett said, and the excitement Colleen had sensed vibrated in her voice. "Colleen, I've been offered the Monique St. Amour assignment."

Colleen blinked. "The what? I don't understand."

"The Monique St. Amour assignment. You know, the cosmetic company. It's to be a worldwide promotion, and they'll be photographing me at the Eiffel Tower in Paris, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Parthenon in Greece—"

"Now just a minute," Colleen interrupted, "you're marrying Erik on Saturday."

"That's what I had to talk to you about. I'm not going to marry Erik, Colleen." Brett looked away. "I can't. Oh, don't you see, this one assign-

ment will open doors for me for years to come."

"But what about Erik?" Colleen couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Brett's expression changed to one of distress. "I love Erik. That's why I've decided against marrying him. He'd never be happy with a dedicated career woman for a wife, and we both know that's what I'll always be."

A blind anger replaced Colleen's stunned incredulity. "How could you?" she demanded. "I just don't believe this." Colleen felt a wave of sympathy for Erik that was agonizing in its intensity. It would devastate him to lose her. She closed her eyes. "Have you told Erik yet?"

"Well-uh—no, not yet." Something in Brett's tone made Colleen open her eyes. "I was hoping maybe . . . I mean, you and Erik are such good friends. What I'm trying to say is I . . . I want you to tell him for me."

Colleen was thankful for the chair she was gripping so tightly. Without it she doubted that her quaking knees would hold her up.

COLLEEN SPENT the rest of the afternoon telephoning the Ford Motor Company and subsidiaries in and around the Detroit area, but in each case Erik either wasn't expected or had just left. He was well-known and liked in the Ford empire. When he'd graduated from college he'd turned down a contract to play professional football in favor of continuing his education, and after he got his master's degree in engineering he went to work for Ford. He had a high-salaried position with a lot of responsibilities, and his future with the company was bright.

At five o'clock, Colleen started calling Erik's apartment, but by the time she had to leave for the church for

the rehearsal there was still no answer. The situation had turned into a nightmare.

She didn't bother to change into the sheer wool and silk dress she'd planned to wear that evening. There'd be no festivities now. Instead she wore the slacks and sweater she'd had on all day.

Colleen was early, and the church was lighted and open but empty. She slid into one of the pews and closed her eyes.

She heard voices and the sound of footsteps as someone came into the vestibule. Colleen stood and turned around, both hoping and dreading to see Erik, but it was two of the bridesmaids and their escorts. From then on people streamed in, but there was still no sign of Erik.

Colleen positioned herself at the back of the church. Then she almost missed him when he walked in surrounded by his father and mother, his two sisters and their husbands and his college-age brother with his date. Colleen groaned.

She took a deep breath and started down the aisle after him. She called his name and the whole group turned and looked at her. Erik positively radiated happiness. His wide green eyes sparkled, and a grin lit up his whole face.

His grin grew even broader when he saw her. "Hi, honey," he said and caught her in a brotherly hug.

Several of the group were still standing there listening, and she struggled to keep her voice calm. "Uh—Erik, could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," he said magnanimously.

She turned, hoping he would follow without question.

She led him into the office. Colleen's nerves were almost at the breaking point.

Erik took off his overcoat and tossed in onto a chair. "Now, what's the problem? Don't tell me Brett has a case of the pre-wedding jitters." His eyes sparkled with humor.

"I only wish she did." Colleen's mouth was trembling. "Erik, I don't know how to tell you this other than to just say it. Brett's gone."

He looked perplexed. "Gone? Gone where? You mean she went out of town and is late getting back?"

Colleen clenched her fists. "No. I mean Brett left this afternoon for New York, Erik. She's not going to marry you. She's signing a contract with the Monique St. Amour cosmetic company for a long-term modeling assignment."

The color had drained from Erik's face. He just stood there leaning against the door and looking as if he'd been poleaxed.

She walked toward him and put her hand on his arm. "I called your office, but Trish said you were out and wouldn't be back. I contacted every Ford plant in the area, but I couldn't catch up with you. I started calling your apartment at five o'clock. I left countless messages on your answering machine. I did phone again just before leaving for the church, but you still didn't answer."

He drew a shuddering breath. "I was probably in the shower. I got home just in time to clean up and come here. I didn't even listen to my phone messages."

He seemed to diminish in size as he walked to the window and looked out into the night. He was silent for so long that she began to wonder if he'd forgotten she was there.

"Do you want me to explain to the others and send them home?"

He still stood with his back to her. "No. I'll do that in a little while."

She left and pushed the door shut behind her, then leaned against it and closed her eyes. Her knees were shaking.

When the office door finally opened, Erik still looked punchy, as if he had been hit one too many times.

He moved forward and spoke into the public-address system. "May I have your attention please?"

The noisy group quieted and he continued. "I'm deeply sorry to have to tell you that Brett and I have come to the decision that neither of us is prepared to make the total commitment that is required in a marriage."

A gasp rose from the assembly, and Erik paused. He was pale, but seemed remarkably composed and articulate. Colleen knew it was an act, the result of years of training and practice in the emotional deception of top-level businessmen.

He held up his hand and spoke into the microphone again. "I apologize for the inconvenience. I'm going to impose on you with one request. Will all of you please get together to notify the guests that the wedding has been canceled? I realize this is a big job, but I'm—I'm just not up to it."

His voice broke, and Colleen knew his composure wasn't going to hold out much longer. Apparently he knew it, too, because he didn't attempt to say anything else but strode quickly down the aisle and out of the church, leaving the shocked wedding party behind watching him.

Without stopping to weigh the consequences, Colleen slid out of the pew and ran after him.

Colleen reached Erik's Ford Mustang just as he turned the key and brought the powerful engine to life. Without hesitation she opened the door and jumped inside.

His tone was anything but welcoming. "I don't want company right now."

She didn't move. "I'm not going to leave you alone."

"Colleen, dammit, get out of the car."

She fastened her seat belt. "You might as well get going because I'm staying."

Erik muttered an oath. "All right, be stubborn, but don't say I didn't warn you."

They roared out of the parking lot and around several corners before the heavy Detroit traffic slowed them down. Neither spoke until about fifteen minutes later when he pulled into the small parking lot beside a rundown frame building with a garish neon sign proclaiming it Willy's Tavern.

He opened the door and stepped out, slamming it behind him. Colleen got out of the car and ran to catch up with him.

"Colleen—" he said threateningly.

She didn't wait for him to finish. "I won't even talk if you don't want to, but I'm not going to leave you alone. In a couple of hours when my brother has had time to get home I'll call him and tell him where we are and he can take over, but till then you're stuck with me. Now, can we go inside? I'm freezing."

Erik uttered an impatient growl, then stalked into the bar and led her to a table in the corner.

When the miniskirted barmaid came, Erik ordered a Jack Daniel's neat and Colleen asked for a plain cola.

When the waitress brought their drinks Erik downed his in two gulps and asked for another. By the time they'd been there for an hour he was downing his fourth whiskey.

"Erik," she said as he raised his hand to signal the waitress, "if you want to drink, fine, but let's go home. Then I'll call and let April know where we are so she can send Devin over when he gets back from Lansing."

"I don't need a keeper, Colleen," he muttered.

She shook her head. "I know you don't need a keeper," she said, "but you do need someone to care."

Erik's gaze softened as he put out his big hand and cupped her chin. "And do you care, little one?"

"Yes, I care," she said as she looked into the green eyes that had changed from icy to warm. "I've always cared."

She swayed toward him as his face lowered to meet her parted lips. It was a gentle, affectionate kiss, the sort a man would give his best friend's little sister.

He raised his head and murmured, "Okay."

He helped her into her coat, and the blast of frigid wind that greeted them when they opened the door smelled fresh and clean.

They climbed into the car, and he sighed. "You're an obnoxious little brat. You know that?"

"Sure, but you love me all the same," she teased.

To her surprise he reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. "Ah, that I do; honey," he said and kissed her palm. "That I do." He kissed it again and drew her to him, holding her close as he buried his face in the fragrant hollow of her neck.

She rubbed her cheek in his shaggy blond hair, and kissed him on the temple. He spoke almost reluctantly. "Don't you know you can get into serious trouble comforting a grown man the way you're doing?"

"Can I?" she murmured.

His hand moved up to cup her clothed breast. "Tonight I suspect I'll do almost anything to deaden the pain."

She gasped as the tip of his finger circled her suddenly rigid nipple, and her hands dug into his shoulders.

If Colleen had been disappointed in his kisses before, this one more than made up for it. Her mouth opened wider to his plundering kiss, and he took possession of one full breast while his other hand explored her firm round bottom. Even more exciting was the hard pressure of his urgent desire against her hip.

It was a flash of headlights and the raucous honking of a horn that finally brought them to their senses, and they pulled apart. "That does it," he said gruffly, his voice unsteady, "I'm not yet reduced to seducing the teenage sisters of my friends."

That brought Colleen back to earth with a thud, and a flash of temper. "I'm not a teenager as you well know, Erik Johansen. I'm twenty-four years old."

She jammed the key in the ignition and started the motor. She backed the car out and headed it in the direction of Dearborn and Erik's apartment. He gave a disgusted grunt and leaned back against the seat with his eyes closed.

From time to time Colleen glanced at him. There was a restlessness about him that belied his relaxed pose. Where was her shame? Her pride? Erik had been getting along just fine without her help for thirty-four years, so why was she convinced that he couldn't survive this night without her?

Erik followed Colleen into the glass-and-steel apartment building, then held the elevator door open while she entered. The elevator rose noiselessly to the fourteenth floor. He escorted her to his apartment. He unlocked the door

and reached inside to flick the light switch, then stepped back to allow her to proceed him.

Colleen walked into the living room. The white carpet, black upholstery and glass-and-chrome tables seemed cold and unwelcoming. Before Brett had "modernized" it, Erik's living room had been a homey comfortable chamber furnished with oversize leather chairs and sofa, and heavy serviceable tables and a desk.

She headed for the kitchen to make coffee. When she returned to the living room about ten minutes later with the coffee carafe and two mugs on a tray, she found him sitting on the sofa with a drink in his hand. He looked shattered.

She reached out tentatively to stroke an unruly lock of hair off his forehead. He jerked back, and the sudden movement caused his whiskey to spill at his feet.

Colleen gasped and stared at the puddle. "Oh, Erik, I'm sorry," she moaned, and dropped to her knees to begin scrubbing at it with a napkin. "Your beautiful white carpet. It'll be ruined."

"Leave it," he grated. "I always hated this carpet."

He lifted the glass coffeepot off the tray and began pouring the hot black liquid in a steady stream on the rug. Colleen watched in horror.

"Now, let's see what we can do about those good-for-nothing tables." He laughed, and there was a note of hysteria in the sound. "Never could understand why Brett insisted I spend money on those things. I can't even put my feet up."

Before Colleen had an inkling of what he intended, he'd grabbed a poker from beside the fireplace and slammed it across the middle of the oblong glass table, totally destroying it.

He surveyed the carnage with sightless eyes. Then he seemed to snap out of his trance. The poker dropped from his fingers. "Oh, my God!" he said wearily.

Colleen went to him then, and he put his arms around her and clasped her so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

After a while his hands began making light caressing movements across her back, then gradually moved to her sides where his fingers could stroke the fullness of her breasts. He lowered his head and nipped at the sensitive cord of her neck as he murmured her name. "Colleen, Colleen, my sweet little Colleen." His breathing was raspy and uneven. "Why didn't you leave while I could still let you go?"

The question didn't require an answer and she gave none. The fire he'd ignited in her earlier now flamed into a roaring inferno that only he could quench, and she fitted her hands to either side of his face and covered his mouth with her own. She knew what she was inviting.

He responded to her kiss with a frenzy that was contagious, and she opened her mouth to the erotic plunder of his impatient tongue. With a swift movement he swept her into his arms and carried her down the short hall to the spacious bedroom. He put her down on the bed and pulled off his shirt, then joined her on the bed.

Colleen's fingers dug into his bare shoulders as her head tipped back and a shuddering moan escaped from deep inside her.

It was a moment of violent tenderness that tore asunder the girl she had been and brought forth the woman she was meant to be.

*

HE WANTED her again. He should have known this would happen, and he either should have sent her away or left himself, after the violent urgency of their lovemaking. But she'd quickly fallen asleep in his arms like a child, trusting and content.

Now his desire was driving him crazy again. It had started while he was still groggy from sleep, and by the time he was awake enough to control himself it was too late. Unless she pushed him away he was going to take her once more.

She sucked in her breath sharply and the muscles in her thighs tightened around his exploring hand. "Erik," she gasped. "I want—oh please—"

He wanted to keep her in his arms, in his bed, and make slow, tender, passionate love to her all morning.

He might have managed it if she hadn't rolled over and put her arms around him, pressing her soft nude body full length against his hard, fully aroused one. He gritted his teeth. How in hell could he make it last when they were both being incinerated by the heat from their all-consuming desire?

He couldn't. With a groan he fitted himself within the cradle of her womanhood, and a few seconds later the whole world exploded.

THE SUN was well up in the sky by the time Colleen woke again. She stretched lazily and rolled over only to find that she was alone in the oversize bed.

She sat up and pulled the sheet around her as the door opened. "It's about time you woke up, sleepy-head," Erik said as he strolled in, carrying a mug of coffee in each hand.

He was fully dressed in jeans and a shirt. His manner was friendly but

cool. Maybe "uneasy" was a better description.

He sat down on a low chest. "My vacation starts Monday so I decided to leave today."

Colleen's hand jerked and her coffee sloshed to the top of the mug. "You're going away?"

There was pain in his eyes. "Yes," he said, "but not to the Caribbean for a honeymoon as planned. I didn't waken you earlier because you were sleeping soundly, and I figured you needed the rest."

A hot flush of embarrassment engulfed her, and she buried her face in her raised knees.

"You can blush at a remark as mild as that," Erik's tone was pained. "Colleen, why didn't you tell me you were—" he seemed to grope for the right word—"innocent. Are you all right? Did I—injure—you in any way?"

His concern brought a lump to her throat. "I'm fine. That maidenhead was getting to be a bother. I'd become an oddity. How many twenty-four-year-old women do you know who are still intact?"

"None, now," he muttered.

The corners of her mouth lifted in a tiny smile. "I'd have told you if you'd asked."

"Asked," he rasped. "I was in no condition to make polite conversation. Even if you'd told me, I couldn't have stopped. I'm not proud of my actions."

He'd wanted her, wanted her badly. But Colleen knew that to him she'd always be Devin's sweet little kid sister, and his memories of having taken her to bed would be a guilty torment instead of an erotic pleasure.

*

IT WAS NOON before Colleen was finally free to leave the doctor's office, still reeling from shock. How could she have been so naive? She'd known she wasn't protected during the night she'd spent with Erik four weeks before, but she'd closed her mind to everything but her burning need to be one with him. Well, they'd been one, and now she was going to be two.

When she walked into the lobby with its wall of windows she could see that the February storm had intensified. She'd have to call a cab to take her back downtown to work, but not yet. She needed to be alone, to think, to plan.

She was going to have Erik's baby. She was going to be a mother. Even now there was a tiny human being developing inside her, being nurtured by her body.

She started toward the public phone when she heard her name being called in a familiar voice, one she'd hoped to get out of the building without hearing. "Colleen, wait up. What are you doing here?"

She turned and faced her brother Devin. He worked in the business department of the medical clinic. She wasn't prepared for this confrontation. She tensed, suddenly seized by a sense of panic.

Devin's smile changed to a frown. "What's the matter? You're white as a sheet. You've just seen one of the doctors, haven't you?"

She shook her head as she tried to get hold of herself. "I'm all right, really."

"You certainly don't look fine." The sarcasm in his tone told her he was having none of it. "If you are in such

perfect condition, why spend time and money on a medical examination?"

She took a deep breath. *Might as well get it over with.* She tilted her head up and thrust out her chin. "I'm pregnant."

Devin stiffened and his fists clenched, but when he spoke his voice had a studied calm. "I see. Who's the bastard who did this to you?"

Oh, dear. It was going to be just as difficult as she'd feared. "I don't think that's any of your business."

Devin's voice was deadly. "Does he know about the baby?"

"No."

"So when do you plan to tell him?"

Colleen shook her head. "I don't know."

This was all happening too fast. He was making her face things she hadn't even thought about yet.

"You do plan to tell him, don't you?"

"*I don't know!*" She ran her fingers through her hair. "Stop pushing me, Devin. I just found out about this. Just leave me alone."

A tearing sob shook her, and then she was in Devin's arms. His voice was husky with regret. "Honey, don't cry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

Once started, the sobs continued uncontrollably. The baby was a fact. She'd allowed it to be conceived and it was her responsibility.

She hadn't seen or heard from Erik since that Friday morning four weeks before when they'd locked up his apartment and he'd taken her home.

No, she wouldn't tell Erik about the baby. He'd be tormented by guilt and feel that he had to take care of her, support her and the baby.

It was Sunday, February 14. She'd slept late and was still wearing her robe

when the doorbell rang. With a grimace of annoyance she tossed the newspaper aside and headed for the front door.

She opened the door, and for a moment they just stood there staring at each other. Finally Erik grinned. "Is there any chance that you might invite me in?"

She stepped back and gestured. "Of course. Please come in. I—I didn't know you were back."

He walked in and shut the door behind him. "I got back from vacation a couple of weeks ago, but then had to leave immediately for the West Coast on a business trip. I just got home again yesterday."

She cleared her throat nervously. "Did you have a nice vacation?"

That wasn't what she wanted to know, but it was the closest she could come to asking how he had survived the past five weeks.

He shrugged. "I just traveled around. Did some skiing in Maine and some surfing in Florida." He looked at her squarely. "How about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine. Been busy with inventory and first of the year sales."

He was still watching her. "That's not what I want to know. Let me rephrase the question. Colleen, is there any chance... Would you know yet if..."

He clutched at the back of his neck with his hand. "Oh, damn, what I'm trying to ask is—Colleen, are you pregnant?"

Colleen stared at him, stunned by the impact of his question. "How did you know?"

The words were out before she was aware that she'd spoken, and there was no way she could call them back.

"Then you are?" The blood had drained from Erik's face and he looked thoroughly shaken. "Nobody told me.

I've known all along that this might happen. Neither of us took precautions that night."

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and dropped his face in his hands. "Oh, God, honey, I'm sorry. You trusted me. I never should have touched you."

She twisted her fingers together. "We're not going to accomplish anything by arguing over who's most responsible. I'm going to have a baby and there's nothing we can do about it now."

His gaze sought hers. "Do you want the child, Colleen?"

She knew what he was asking. "Yes, I do. I want this baby very much. I'm capable of supporting myself and my child."

His shoulders slumped. "Are you convinced that I'm so thoughtless that I'd leave you to face this alone? It's my child, too, Colleen." His tone was bleak. "Isn't there any room for me in your plans?"

She stepped closer and put her hands on his shoulders. "I don't want anything from you that you can't give freely and happily."

His arms closed around her and he buried his face in her soft black hair. "Oh, my little love," he groaned. "I don't deserve you. I'm sure you wouldn't have chosen me to be the father of your children, but if you'll give me a chance I'll try hard to be a good one. I'd like for us to get married immediately. I—"

Colleen leaned back and looked up at him. "But you don't have to marry me. A lot of single women raise children nowadays."

"Not my children, they don't," Erik growled.

She'd loved him for so long and now he wanted to marry her. But it wasn't

ecstasy she felt. "You don't love me," she said against his shoulder.

She felt him tense. "If you're talking about so-called 'romantic' love, then you should be glad I don't. I've good reason to know how short-lived that emotion is. Believe me, honey, what I feel for you is much more lasting."

Colleen wondered if he had any idea how much anguish there was still in his voice when he spoke of "romantic" love. He was marrying Colleen only because she was pregnant with the baby he'd never intended to sire, and his guilt at having seduced his friend's younger sister gnawed at his self-respect. Such a union didn't have a chance of surviving, but she wasn't strong enough to refuse.

ERIK AND Colleen were married the following Friday evening in a small formal wedding. Devin managed to keep his fury under control during the ceremony, where he served as best man. He'd had four days to cool down, but on Monday evening when Erik and Colleen had gone to his home to tell him they were getting married, he'd exploded with rage.

Colleen had seen the exact moment when the truth hit him. The look in his eyes changed from puzzlement to ice, and focused on Erik. "You? You're the bastard who got my sister pregnant!"

The shock and pain in his voice was overshadowed by outrage, and before April could reach out to stop him he jumped up and strode across the room to confront Erik. His fist shot out and connected with Erik's firm jaw. It knocked him backward, but he had apparently braced himself for the blow and he stayed on his feet.

"He's not doing you any favor by marrying you, Colleen. He's in love with Brett."

Erik's arms went around her protectively. "Now just a minute. I deserved that blow and I accept it, but let's get one thing settled. I'll do my best to make Colleen happy. I do love her. I've always loved her. She's precious to me. I know you'll find that difficult to believe under the circumstances, but it's true. I don't blame you for wanting to take me apart. I'm not offering either excuses or explanations for what happened that night, but I swear to you that I took her with love and it was—good—for both of us."

He was actually blushing. This giant who could be violent one moment and gentle the next found it embarrassing to talk so intimately about her to her brother, and Colleen found it warmly endearing.

Devin and Erik had arrived at an uneasy truce that night, and now Devin was standing at the altar beside Erik while Erik took Colleen's hand and they knelt in front of the priest. After the vows and the rings had been exchanged he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The reception was a dinner party held in a private dining room at the luxurious Westin Hotel. On Monday they would move into Colleen's apartment until they could find a suitable one for the two of them. Erik had given up the place where he'd expected to live with Brett when he'd returned from his vacation.

The dinner seemed to go on forever while Colleen merely toyed with her food. When finally the dishes were cleared away and the combo switched to dance music, Erik led her onto the floor to begin the first waltz.

After a few minutes other couples joined them, and Erik's arm tightened

around Colleen as he murmured, "How much longer before we can sneak out of here and go upstairs?"

Her heart pounded and her blue eyes sparkled as she teased. "You have something better to do upstairs?"

He nibbled at her earlobe. "Much better, and in another minute everyone who looks at me is going to know it."

She felt the warm blush that turned her face rosy. "My goodness, I didn't realize you were one of those impatient bridegrooms. It's been so hectic getting ready for the wedding that we've hardly seen each other."

"We're going to remedy that starting right now. I'm not going to let you out of my sight all weekend."

Her face tilted upward to invite the kiss he seemed most eager to give. This was the night she'd dreamed of ever since her adolescent fantasies, but never expected to happen. She was Mrs. Colleen Johansen, Erik's wife. She shivered and his arm tightened around her. "Are you cold?"

She shook her head against his chest. "No, just happy. I love being here with you. I love having you hold me. I love—" She hesitated. She'd almost said, "I love you," but she didn't think he wanted to hear that.

HER GOWN fell in a graceful heap on the floor around her. For a moment his gaze roamed slowly over her and even in the dim light she could see the appreciation in his green eyes, then he lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

The lights from the waterfront provided just the right touch of illumination. Erik positioned Colleen crosswise on the king-size bed, and followed her down to lie beside her. His hand cupped her breast, which seemed to

swell in his palm. He lowered his head and took the tip of it in his mouth and began a gentle sucking that left her breathless and aching with the need for more.

He didn't leave her wanting, but slid his hand to her flat stomach. His mouth claimed hers and her lips parted to invite his entry as his hand wended its way with agonizing slowness over the swell of her hip and down to her thigh where his fingers stroked the sensitive underside.

Colleen's breath was coming in short gasps as his seeking fingers drove her to the edge of madness. She dug her fingernails into the taut muscles across his shoulders and arched against his pulsating masculinity.

When she cried out his name, he moved quickly then to plunge deep into the fiery heat that fused them and made them one. They rocked together in a rhythm as old as time, and the melody soared until it reached a crescendo of rolling, pounding drums. The song of ecstasy.

True to his prediction, Erik and Colleen spent most of their honeymoon in bed. They got up long enough to order food from room service and eat it at the table in front of the glass wall where they watched helicopters flying below them. A fair portion of their time was spent in the large sunken tub where they soaped each other with great attention to detail, got lost in billowing mounds of bubbles and made love underwater.

THE NEXT month flew by, and the March days grew longer, but the weather remained cold and the first day of spring was ushered in by another blizzard with snowdrifts ten feet high and traffic practically at a standstill.

Colleen still had trouble thinking of herself as pregnant. She felt great—no morning sickness or spells of weakness. Her breasts were starting to swell and become tender, but her stomach was still flat and firm. She smiled, remembering Erik's delight with the fullness of her breasts and the gentleness with which he handled them.

No, she had no complaints. He was everything she could have hoped for in a husband. Most men would have resented being trapped by a child they'd never intended to father, but not Erik. He was looking forward to the baby with an eagerness that positively glowed from him.

She told herself that once the baby was born he would forget all about Brett Kendrick.

Three days later Colleen woke feeling as if she had slept too long in the wrong position. She had a vague ache that she couldn't seem to pin down or identify, and she dismissed it as an off day.

It was a busy morning at the shop, and as the day progressed Colleen's discomfort increased. She felt a heaviness in her abdomen, and the ache she'd been unable to identify earlier settled in her lower back. She stepped into the bathroom to freshen up, and it was there she realized with a shock that this was a potentially serious situation. She was bleeding.

She was taken to the emergency room at St. Mary's Hospital. Three hours later it was all over. The baby could not be saved.

Colleen felt numb. Everything had happened too quickly. The previous day she'd felt wonderful and had congratulated herself on not even being queasy in the mornings. Now, twenty-four hours later, the baby had simply slipped away. Maybe it had never been.

No, she knew better than that. She'd felt it when she'd miscarried. Her baby, and Erik's. The precious gift Erik had given her without ever intending to.

She flung her arms around her husband's neck and sobbed, "Oh, Erik, I lost the baby." The grief that had been tearing at her became a keening wail as sobs convulsed her slender frame. He murmured loving words of endearment and held her as the storm of anguish raged out of control.

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COLLEEN returned to work fully recovered in body. But her mind hadn't fared as well. She couldn't seem to shake the depression that had plagued her since she'd lost the baby. Even Erik's tender concern didn't lessen her disappointment.

By the end of the week Colleen had regained most of her strength. She'd managed to shed some of the debilitating depression that had settled over her, but her present thoughts were no happier, only more realistic.

They had started the night Erik came home with news. "Honey," he said as he helped Colleen set the table for dinner, "I got a lead on an apartment today."

"An apartment?" She wasn't quite sure what he meant.

"An apartment for us. We never intended to stay here, and this one sounds just about what we're looking for. C. J. Lawrence, the head of truck marketing, and his wife have bought a house and are giving up their apartment. It has three bedrooms, two baths and an all-electric kitchen."

Colleen felt a clutch of apprehension. "But, Erik, we don't need such a large place."

Erik turned and looked at her. "Colleen, I know what you're think-

ing. You figure that now there won't be a baby, we don't need a bigger place, but you're wrong. It'll do us both good to get out of here, start over again someplace where there aren't so many sad memories."

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "Could we wait awhile before making up our minds?"

He shrugged. "Sure, but it won't be available long. If we want it we'll have to give them an answer in the next few days."

The knowledge lay heavily on her conscience. How long would their marriage last now that its reason for being was no longer viable? She knew Erik had intended it to be permanent, but that was when he thought he would have a child to raise.

Colleen slept badly that night, and she was preoccupied all day Monday.

The examination a few days later revealed that Colleen's body had returned to normal, as if the baby had been only a dream too good to come true.

On the way home she snuggled against Erik, and he drove with one arm around her and one on the steering wheel.

At the apartment house they walked with their arms around each other up the stairs to their second-floor apartment. When they were inside with the door locked Colleen took his hand and led him toward the bedroom.

He laid her down on top of the thickly quilted bedspread, and they undressed quickly.

His mouth fastened on her parted lips and his tongue plundered the depths of her willing mouth as his roaming hand cupped her damp breast, fondled it until it was heavy and aching.

"Erik," she gasped as he moved his hand lower still, probing to be sure she was ready.

He lifted himself over her and her fingers clutched at his hips, guiding and encouraging him. His first thrust was deep, and she wrapped her legs around his buttocks and moved with him in the frantic dance of rapture.

They slept little that night, and by morning Colleen was stiff and sore and happily exhausted.

They took their coffee into the living room, and Erik picked up the mail. "Honey," he said as he opened an envelope and extracted a bill from the telephone company, "I don't like to pressure you, but we have to let the Realtor know whether or not we want the apartment."

She shivered. He had just given her the perfect opening.

"Erik," she said carefully, "I don't think we should take the apartment. We only got married because of the baby, and now that there is no child there's also no reason to stay married. I— What I'm saying is that I'm willing to file for divorce if that's what you want."

That wasn't the way she'd wanted to say it at all. It sounded so cold and objective.

The look on his white face was the same stunned anguish that had been stamped on his features when she'd told him that Brett had walked out on their wedding. Dear God, what had she done?

He'd dropped the mail he'd been holding, and his hands were clenched at his sides. He looked ghastly, and she went to him. "Sweetheart," she said in a voice that was muffled with tears, "I'm so dreadfully sorry."

He didn't touch her, but neither did he push her away. "Why are you do-

ing this to me, Colleen?" he asked, his tone flat and tired.

"I didn't mean to," she protested. "I thought I was doing the decent thing by letting you go. I love you, Erik."

"Don't talk to me about love," he grated. "It's just a word that women use to get what they want from a man. I've been through that once, remember?"

Her arms tightened around him and she was shaken by a series of sobs. "Oh, darling, listen to me, please. I don't want a divorce. I thought you did. You only married me because of the baby. I didn't want to hold on to you if you didn't want me. I don't want anything from you but your love."

He brought up his hands to push her away. "Forget it," he roared. "Love is the one thing you'll never get from me. I'm not a congenital idiot, just a blind fool." He stood up and laughed. A short, bitter sound. "The funny part of it is that if you'd just been a little more patient, waited another couple of weeks you would have had that, too. In spite of my experience with Brett, I was actually falling in love with you." He walked away from her. "You'd think I'd learn, wouldn't you? Well, I admit to being slow, but you taught me well. You'll be my wife, Colleen, but you'll never be my love!"

A cry like the wail of a mortally wounded doe was torn from deep within her, and she turned and stumbled into the living room, where she curled up in an abject ball of misery on the sofa and sobbed.

COLLEEN TOLD herself everything was fine with her marriage, and outwardly it was. But theirs wasn't the relaxed loving relationship they'd shared before she'd mentioned divorce. Erik no

longer hugged and kissed her impulsively, or used terms of endearment such as darling, sweetheart or honey. If he was delayed at the office he had his secretary call her instead of doing it himself. He signed the lease on the new apartment without consulting her. They had sex every night, but they never made love.

Now he never touched her before they got into bed, and as soon as it was over he turned away from her and slept. The only thing that kept her from being too upset was the fact that in the middle of the night, when he was asleep, he would turn back and take her in his arms, exhale a little sigh and hold her close until morning. It was as if his body accepted what his mind would not—that he needed to hold her and let her hold him before he could sleep soundly.

Colleen and Erik were notified that they could move into the new apartment the last weekend in April, which gave them just a week to make all the arrangements. One task still undone was choosing the furnishings for their bedroom. Colleen tried to get Erik to agree to use what they had, but he was adamant. Everything had to be new.

They went shopping on Tuesday evening and found a gleaming, solid-brass king-size bed that Colleen coveted on sight. Erik had been unusually quiet during their search, and now he questioned the clerk hesitantly. "Does this same design come in twin size?"

Colleen gaped at him, sure she had misunderstood. "Twin size?"

He avoided looking at her directly. "I thought... well, there's plenty of room for two beds. I just thought we might sleep better..."

He plodded on but she'd stopped listening. Erik didn't want to sleep with her anymore!

She struck out and gave him a rough shove that took him by surprise. "You can take your twin beds and go to hell," she grated, then stalked past him and out of the store.

There was a city-transit bus at the curb loading passengers, and Colleen plunged into the group of people boarding it and got on just before the doors shut. She glanced out the window on her way down the aisle and saw Erik standing on the sidewalk looking up and down the street. He hadn't seen her. Good.

She'd wait until she was sure Erik was asleep, then she'd go home. In the morning, she'd pack his things and tell him to leave. After all, it was her apartment. He could move into the big fancy one and sleep by himself to his heart's content.

IT WAS ALMOST one o'clock in the morning. There were no lights on in her apartment. She reached for the light switch, but before she could flip it on the lamp by the lounge chair came on, and she saw Erik sitting there looking up at her.

He looked as if he'd spent the time she'd been gone stretched on the rack. "Wh-why are you sitting here in the dark?" she asked.

He walked wearily toward her. "I was afraid you wouldn't come home if you knew I was here." He stopped in front of her and touched her face with his fingertips, as though assuring himself she was real. "I've been going crazy. You just disappeared off the face of the earth."

He was shivering, and she couldn't resist the urge to put her arms around his neck and hold him. "I got on a bus that was just leaving the curb in front of the store. It took me to a shopping mall, so I went to movie after movie

until I'd calmed down enough to come home."

He rubbed his cheek in her hair. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I don't know why I asked about those damn twin beds."

She cringed and he held her even closer. "Yes, I do," he continued. "I thought if we slept in separate beds I couldn't reach for you in my sleep, and maybe I could eventually learn to live without you."

She felt a stab of anguish. "You want to learn to live without me?"

"I thought you wanted to leave me and I was determined to learn to live without you so I could let you go."

So that was why he'd seemed reluctant to let her get close to him either physically or emotionally.

She stroked her fingers through his disheveled hair. "Erik, I only offered you your freedom because I thought it was what you wanted. I love you, my darling. I've loved you ever since I was eight years old. There's never been anyone else, you have to believe that. I know you don't love me but—"

"You're the dearest person in the world to me," he murmured as he nipped at the underside of her jaw. "Do you think I'd suffer such torment when you casually mention leaving me if you weren't?"

He kissed her then with a passion filled with relief and need.

Afterward, for almost two weeks, Colleen existed in a glow of happiness. It radiated from her, and from Erik, and was commented on with envy by family and friends. They curled up with their arms around each other for hours and talked, sharing the doubts and uncertainties they should have discussed from the start. At night they were truly lovers, with nothing to mar the glory of their coming together

in the most intimate form of communication.

They moved into the new larger apartment, and Colleen was glad Erik had insisted they lease it. He was right, it was perfect for them.

Then one Friday in mid-May when the last of the snow had melted and colorful daffodils and tulips were just beginning to bloom, Colleen was ringing up a sale at the boutique when a startlingly familiar voice spoke from directly in front of her. "Hello, Colleen. I just stopped by to let you know I'm back."

Colleen dropped the package she was holding and looked up into the exquisitely beautiful face of Brett.

COLLEEN GOT home before Erik. Her head throbbed with the pain of wondering how she was going to keep Erik now that Brett was back. Colleen shivered. She didn't believe for a moment that Brett would fade into the background and leave them alone.

Colleen had dinner ready by the time she heard Erik's key in the lock. She met him at the door, and as usual he took her in his arms and kissed her, but it was a chaste kiss, more like that of a dutiful brother than a passionate husband. They looked at each other and she saw the harried, uncertain expression he was unable to hide. "You know that Brett's home, don't you?" she said quietly, and it was a statement not a question.

His arms tightened around her and he rested his chin on the top of her head. "Yes, I do, but how did you know?"

"Brett stopped at the boutique on her way home from the airport. I have a feeling she wants you back."

He put his arms around her again and held her. "Don't you know how

deeply I care for you? Haven't I shown you often enough?"

She pressed herself against him. "It's just that I was so shocked to see her. I had no idea she wasn't happily trailing around Europe." She pushed herself back so she could look up at him. "By the way, how did you know she was here?"

He looked a little unsettled. "She came to see me, too. It must have been right after she left the boutique. The promotion deal with St. Amour fell through and she came back to Detroit to do some fashion modeling."

Colleen suspected there must have been more, but she wasn't going to grill him. She knew he wouldn't welcome Brett back with open arms at noon and still be so sweet with her only a few hours later. But she was terrified that Brett was going to take Erik away from her again. She was afraid her own chances were slim with Brett back in the picture.

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ERIK HURRIED into the lobby of the Dearborn Hyatt Regency Hotel and took the elevator to the revolving rooftop restaurant.

He gave his name to the hostess and explained that he was meeting Senator Paul Forbes. On learning that Paul hadn't yet arrived he ordered a whiskey. He was nursing his drink along when a familiar, husky feminine voice spoke from behind him. "Hello, Erik, what a surprise running into you here."

He turned and looked squarely into Brett's brown eyes.

Her low laugh was sexy as hell. "I'm meeting a Realtor for lunch, and afterward we're going to look at some apartments. I love my parents dearly, but living with them again is something else."

"Decent apartments aren't easy to come by," he said. "Do you have anything special in mind?"

She shrugged. "It'll have to be within my price range. I won't make as much money doing fashion shows as I did as a photographers' model." She dipped her head, then looked up at him through thick sable lashes. "Erik, why did you give up our apartment?"

His hand clenched around his glass, and he tore his gaze from hers just in time to see Paul Forbes walk through the door. He'd never been so happy to see anyone in his life, and he lifted his arm and waved to catch Paul's eye.

The senator walked toward them. Erik greeted him, then introduced him to Brett. Paul looked down at her, making no attempt to hide his admiration, and smiled.

"Call me Paul, Brett." He kept his hand over hers.

"I'll go tell the hostess we're ready for our table," Erik said and started to rise.

"No need," replied Paul, "I told her when I came in, but since I was late they gave ours to someone else, so we'll have to wait."

Erik groaned silently and sat back down as Paul turned to Brett. "Do you work for Ford, too?" he asked.

She favored him with her sweetest smile. "No, I'm a model."

"I should have known." His hand tightened on hers. "A woman as beautiful as you must be swamped with offers to model."

Brett's smile warmed. "How very nice of you to think so." Her voice had lowered a notch. "I don't exactly have to fight them off, but I do all right."

The hostess came to tell Paul that he had a telephone call. He excused himself, and returned a few minutes later looking annoyed. "Sorry, Erik," he said, "but there's a problem at my of-

fice in Detroit and I'm going to have to go down and straighten it out. I won't be able to stay for lunch. Can we set up another appointment?"

"No problem," said Erik.

Paul took Brett's hand in his. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Brett," he murmured huskily. "Is there any chance we could have dinner sometime soon?"

"Of course," she replied. She opened her purse and took out a small pad of paper and a pen. "I'll write down my phone number for you."

Paul took the slip of paper, squeezed her hand and walked away.

"He's married, Brett," Erik said as they sat back down.

Before she could answer they were interrupted by a handsome, upwardly mobile young man whom Brett introduced as her Realtor friend, and Erik excused himself and stalked out of the bar toward the elevator. He'd lost all appetite for lunch.

Erik's next encounter with Brett wasn't accidental. She called him the next day at the office, and he was furious. "I don't want you calling me, Brett," he barked. "We haven't anything to say to each other."

"But we have, darling. I want you to tell me about Paul Forbes. I want to know what I'll be getting into if I go out with him."

Erik sighed. "Paul's bad news for you, Brett. He's married, has been for a long time and has two sons, but it's never kept him out of the bed of any woman who captures his fancy."

"You think I should steer clear of him?"

"I know you should. You don't need the kind of anguish he'd set you up for. I'll tell you exactly what'll happen when he calls you. He'll suggest dinner at his apartment, and if you object he'll take you to some out-of-the-way

restaurant where it's unlikely he'll be recognized. Running around with married men is a losing game. You should know that."

"Thanks a lot," she said sarcastically. "Sorry I took up your precious time." Before she hung up, she added, "You know what, Erik," she said. "I think you're jealous."

Erik swore lustily. Her accusation didn't bear thinking about.

But for the second evening in a row he sulked through dinner, and that night, after he'd kissed Colleen good-night, they each slept on their own side of the bed.

THE MONTH since Brett had returned to Detroit had become a slowly lengthening nightmare that was driving Colleen to the depths of despair.

The trouble had started with a quarrel at the open house for Brett shortly after she had returned. Erik had convinced Colleen that her jealousy had been unfounded. But later in the week he'd come home two days in a row surly, uncommunicative and too tired or upset to make love. She'd told herself he was just overworked, and tried to be understanding, but the cold tentacles of fear were again robbing her of self-confidence. Was he seeing Brett?

In the three weeks since then Erik had worked late several times, and had gone out of town one weekend. She'd offered to go along, but he'd told her that he'd be too busy to entertain her. He hadn't even bothered to call.

Colleen felt demeaned by the jealous suspicion that haunted her, but she couldn't banish it. Did Erik want the woman he'd first intended to marry? If so, why didn't he ask for his freedom?

She had to see Erik and talk to him, and it wouldn't wait until tonight.

When things slacked off at the boutique Colleen decided to go to Erik's office and catch him before he went to lunch.

Unfortunately it didn't work out that way.

"He asked me to make a reservation for him at the Rusty Duck," his secretary informed her.

Colleen hesitated. With so many restaurants in this area why would he choose to drive all the way to the waterfront? "Was he meeting someone? Or taking a guest?" she asked.

"I don't know. He just asked me to reserve a small table and I did. He didn't mention a guest."

Colleen thanked the woman and left.

The popular waterfront restaurant was crowded. At first she didn't see Erik, but then she caught a glimpse of him at a table partially hidden behind an oversize plant in the far corner. She skirted between the closely set tables until she was within a few inches of the potted bush. She smiled and walked around it. "Erik, I hope you don't mind, but—"

It was then that she realized he wasn't alone. Across from him in the secluded area was Brett, and they were holding hands on top of the table!

Colleen rocked with the shock that tore through her. The look on Erik's face left no room for doubts. His first expression of blank surprise quickly turned to one of anguish.

A strangled cry that she didn't recognize as her own caused voices to still and heads to turn as she whirled and ran out of the restaurant. She'd been vaguely aware of a voice calling her name as she made her hasty exit. Then Erik caught her by the arm.

"Go to hell!" she snapped as she tried to pull away.

"I already have," he replied, and with an arm around her waist half carried her across the lot to his car.

She finally gave up struggling and sank back as the car swung out into the line of traffic.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry," Erik's voice was unsteady. "I know what you're thinking, but it's just not true."

She bristled with rage. What kind of idiot did he think she was? "Are you telling me this is the only time you've been out with Brett since she got back?"

He hesitated, and his hesitation told her everything she didn't want to know. "Not exactly," he said, "but—"

"And did you hold hands each time?" The question was out before she knew she was going to ask it.

"No!" he said emphatically.

She closed her eyes until they reached the apartment.

Neither spoke until Erik locked the apartment door behind them. He walked over to the bar and poured himself a glass of whiskey.

She drew a deep breath. "What is it you want, Erik? A divorce?"

"No." His voice was harsh. "You're my wife and I'll never let you go."

She uttered a brittle, mirthless laugh. "But that was before Brett came back."

He gripped her arm and led her over to the sofa. "Now listen to me, sweetheart," he said, "and try to understand. I had no intention of seeing Brett."

He told her of seeing Brett in the bar of the Hyatt Regency while he was waiting for Paul Forbes, and of her call the following day to discuss the senator's intentions.

Erik sat forward with his arms on his thighs and twirled his glass between his palms. "I told her she was a fool to get

involved with married men. She took exception and we quarreled."

"It was none of your business," Colleen grated.

"You're right, it wasn't," he answered, "but I guess I still felt protective of her."

"But why did you see her again?" Colleen wasn't buying his watered-down explanation. "And don't try to tell me that you met accidentally clear over at the Rusty Duck."

His shoulders drooped and he thrust his hands in his pockets. "No," he said regretfully, "this meeting wasn't accidental. Brett called and wanted to see me. She sounded desperate and begged me to have lunch with her and, idiot that I am, I finally gave in."

Colleen couldn't hold back a little cry of anguish, and Erik reached out and pulled her into his embrace. "Oh, sweetheart, don't," he murmured as his arms tightened around her. "I didn't want to see her get involved in the kind of mess that dating a married politician can become if I could prevent it. She told me Paul had asked her to go to Mexico with him for a few days. Furtively, of course. I told her she'd be a fool to go, and she had just put her hand over mine and started to thank me for listening when you came. We were not holding hands."

"Not then, maybe, but what about last weekend?"

He blinked. "Last weekend?"

"When you went to Chicago and wouldn't take me with you," she said impatiently.

His eyes widened. "You think I took Brett with me?"

He looked so astonished that she began to doubt it. "Why not?"

A flash of agitation crossed his face but was quickly banished. "I was booked up every minute of the time I was gone. I'll give you a copy of my

schedule and you can check with the people listed if that's what it takes to convince you." Erik's big hand caressed her back. "I don't need another woman," he murmured. "I have all I can handle right here at home."

He pushed aside her hair and his lips brushed across her nape sending shivers down her back.

It took all the willpower she could marshal to pull away from him. "No, Erik," she said when he reached for her again. "We both know that you can get around me that way, but when we get out of bed the problem's still there. I want you to leave me alone."

THAT NIGHT she made up the double bed in the guest room and crawled into it. She'd barely closed her eyes when he appeared in the doorway, and glared down at her. "What are you doing in here?"

"I'm trying to sleep," she said quietly.

His glance traveled over the rumpled bed, which was considerably smaller than the king-size one they shared. "I see." This time his voice was barely above a murmur. "All right, have it your way." He turned and walked back to the master bedroom.

She lay back down, curled up in a ball with her arms across her stomach and felt sick. He didn't care whether she slept with him or not.

She closed her eyes tightly and pressed her fist to her mouth to stifle the sob that fought for release. A soft noise in the hall caused her to open her eyes.

She saw the bulky outline of Erik's large frame approaching. He pulled back the sheet and blanket on the empty side of the bed and slid in beside her.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, but there was more relief than anger in her tone. She felt his nude body against hers as he settled down.

"I sleep wherever you sleep," he explained while his fingers moved up to stroke her breast through her satin nightgown.

His fingers moved to her other breast and stroked it as his moist lips made little nipping forays across her bare shoulder.

She sucked in her breath and turned to clasp her arms around his waist. He held her close and gently sent fingers of fire spiraling through her until she was oblivious to everything but the driving need that threatened to consume her. "Erik, Erik, Erik," she moaned in a ragged litany that was stilled only when his mouth covered hers, and he moved over her to plunge deep into the inferno he had created.

With every ounce of restraint he could muster Erik thrust slowly into the warm, moist, throbbing darkness of her, and just before his control shattered she heard him speak clearly. "I love you, Colleen. Damn, how I love you."

The world around her fragmented into billions of brightly colored slivers of ecstasy as their two bodies fused and became one.

"I love you," he murmured again. "I wasted a lot of time fighting it, but it was a losing battle. I didn't have the proverbial snowball's chance in hell of holding out against the sweet, loving warmth of you." His arms tightened. "Now all I can do is trust you to love me, too."

She snuggled against him, and ran her hand over the thick mat of hair on his chest. "I do. You know I do. I've loved you all my life."

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SIX WEEKS later Colleen was jubilant. She was two weeks past due, and since her rhythmic cycle had always been twenty-eight days on the dot it could only mean one thing. She was pregnant again!

She wiggled with excitement as she once more sat in the doctor's office waiting for the results of her tests.

The door opened and Dr. Welch entered wearing a big grin. "The test's positive."

Colleen was sure she must glow with happiness. "I knew it. Oh, Frank, I want this baby so badly." She was positively bouncing with exuberance.

Dr. Welch laughed. "Go home and tell your husband the good news."

Colleen drove straight home. She'd never been so happy and content as she had these past six weeks since Erik had admitted that he loved her. Those three words, "I love you," had banished all her doubts and insecurities; and for the first time since he'd proposed to her she'd been able to relax and accept their marriage as a real and lasting one.

She dressed in a mauve hostess gown that hung straight from the shoulders to her ankles. The slit on the left side from the hem to the top of her thigh revealed one long slender bare leg. It was incredibly sexy. Better wait to start dinner until he arrived. If she knew her impatient husband he'd keep her busy for quite some time before they got around to eating.

An hour later she looked at the clock and frowned. Erik should have been home half an hour before unless he'd had to work late, but he always let her know when that happened.

She waited another half hour, then called his office. "He's not here, Mrs. Johansen," the secretary said. "He

wasn't in the office today except for first thing this morning."

Colleen felt a chill of apprehension. She stood holding the phone for several seconds before she put it down. It wasn't like Erik to go off and not let anyone know where he was.

Surely he'd be home any minute now, and have a perfectly logical explanation for his lateness.

By nine o'clock she was too jumpy to sit still. She knew she should go ahead and eat, but the thought of food made her nauseous.

The rest of the night was a blur. The minutes became hours and the hours moved into the first pale fingers of dawn.

She had just looked at her watch when the phone rang. It was 5:36, and the raucous screech of the bell was like an explosion in the silence of the apartment.

The voice on the other end of the line was cool and professional. "Colleen Johansen, this is Mrs. Howard at Memorial Hospital. Your husband has been brought here. He's been burned, and he's unconscious."

Colleen's knuckles whitened as they tightened on the phone. "My God, what happened?"

"He was caught in a fire at a cabin in the wooded area north of Bay City. His hands and arms have second- and third-degree burns, and there's been some smoke inhalation. They were brought in by helicopter about two hours ago, and the doctors have been attending them."

"Them?" The one word burned in Colleen's brain.

The voice hesitated. "Yes, he was brought in with a woman. Brett Kendrick."

Colleen closed her eyes and leaned heavily against the wall. She realized that she was shaking all over.

"Mrs. Johansen, are you still there?"

THE NURSE escorted Colleen to a private room. Erik lay flat on his back in the hospital bed, his hands and arms swathed in bandages and his face and hair streaked with dirt. His eyes were closed, and he looked so—so vulnerable. Colleen reached out and gently caressed a bruise on his jaw.

She stroked his bristly cheeks, and brushed an unruly shock of hair away from his forehead. "Oh, Erik," she murmured brokenly.

It was nearly noon before Erik began to stir. Colleen couldn't touch his bandaged hands, but she stood at the side of the bed and spoke softly to him as she caressed his face, shoulders and chest. He didn't open his eyes, but moaned and moved restlessly as though trying to escape the pain.

Colleen called to the nurse, and by the time she got to the room he was thrashing around on the bed.

He opened his eyes. "Brett?" His voice had a strangled sound, but the name he called was unmistakable. He tried to sit up, but the nurse wrestled him back down. "Brett, where are you?"

Colleen watched numbly while the nurse gave him a shot, then she gathered up her purse and coat and walked out of the room. She was several steps down the hall before she could no longer hear Erik's desperate calls.

Would she ever learn to live with the scream that tore her soul asunder?

BY THE TIME she went back to work on Monday, Colleen could recall little of the nightmarish weekend. Her impressions were of moving about in a fog of anguish and despair.

She'd called the hospital several times to check on Erik's condition, and each time she'd been told that he was asking for her. He probably was. He'd no doubt feel he owed her an explanation, but she didn't want to hear it. She'd reached the limit of her capacity for suffering, and this time she would not, could not, forgive.

Her natural compassion also compelled her to ask about Brett, and she learned that her cousin would be undergoing skin grafts and later plastic surgery, but there would be no lasting disfigurement.

All the joy Colleen had felt on Friday had shriveled and died. She wondered how she'd managed to reach the age of twenty-four still believing in fairy tales. Well, that oversight had been brutally corrected, but not before she'd made the mistake of bringing an innocent child into her fantasies. A mistake there was no way to rectify.

Colleen put in a full day. When she got home she forced herself to broil and eat one of the steaks she'd planned for Erik's special dinner Friday night. There was no sense in letting it spoil, and she needed the nourishment for the baby. If she couldn't provide the poor child with a father, the least she could do was take care of herself so it would be healthy.

This time there was no question of telling Erik. She would not share this baby with him. There would be no child-support payments or joint custody.

Colleen devoutly wished that she'd never met Erik Johansen, but at the same time it took all her strength not to rush to his bedside.

Because she was exhausted she slept well that night, and woke feeling rested and better able to face the day, if not the future. She'd read someplace that the journey of a thousand miles starts

with the first step, and she supposed that was the best way to survive the next fifty years, a day at a time.

At the boutique she found April tired and irritable. When questioned, April admitted what Colleen had suspected, that the whole O'Farrell/Johansen/Kendrick clan was in a state of turmoil. Colleen's family blamed Erik, Erik's family blamed Brett, and Brett's family staunchly defended her and blamed Colleen for marrying Erik in the first place. They were all shouting at each other and hurling accusations, and the turbulent emotions were fraying everybody's nerves. Colleen wished they'd all just stay out of it.

Colleen was later than usual getting home that night. She was standing in front of the open freezer trying to decide between a TV dinner and a bowl of leftover stew when she heard a key turn in the door lock.

A voice she recognized as belonging to the security guard spoke. "Take it easy, Mr. Johansen, or you'll fall flat on your face."

She rushed to the small entryway where she found Erik, dressed in hospital pajamas and robe, leaning against the wall looking as if he was going to collapse. Without thinking she rushed to him and put her arms around his waist.

He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "You wouldn't come to me, so I came to you." He shifted more of his weight to the wall. "Sweetheart, can you help me into the living room?"

The security guard stepped forward, and between him and Colleen they got Erik to the couch. He pulled Colleen down on his lap.

The embarrassed guard excused himself and left. Colleen knew she had to get away from Erik before she forgot everything but the exquisite pleasure of being in his arms again.

"Oh, darling, I've needed you so," he said. "Why did you run away? They told me you came to the hospital, but left before I woke up."

She stiffened with remembered agony and sat up. "You looked right at me and called for Brett."

Erik swore. "I'm sorry. But if I called for Brett it was because I was frantic wondering if she was dead or alive. I only wanted to know if I'd gotten her out in time." His next words came out in a rush. "She called me shortly after I arrived in the office that morning, and she was frantic. It seems she and Paul Forbes had been spending several days together in a cabin he owned. They'd had a vicious quarrel and he'd walked out, taken the car and left her there alone. She had no way to get home."

Colleen interrupted angrily. "Why didn't she call him?"

"She tried but couldn't find him, and she didn't dare leave messages. Even though his wife has filed for divorce now, Paul is still politically vulnerable and Brett didn't want to damage his career."

Erik grunted. "Apparently Brett has finally met her match in Paul Forbes. She was really desperate. There was a storm coming up and the cabin was miles off the main road. I could tell she was scared and—well—I know now I should have handled it differently, but I couldn't very well leave her stranded."

Colleen felt her anger waning as Erik continued. "By the time I got to the turnoff it was raining hard and the wind was blowing. The dirt road that led to the cabin was slippery and it was slow going."

He shifted uncomfortably, and Colleen knew he was tired and hurting. She put her arms around his neck.

"She must have built a fire in the fireplace to take off some of the chill. When I finally got within sight of the cabin I saw flames flying from the chimney and the windows. The whole interior was aflame, and Brett was unconscious on the floor with her clothes on fire."

Erik was trembling, and his voice was raw with pain. "I grabbed her and pulled her outside where I rolled her in the wet, muddy pine needles on the ground. I remember that my lungs were about to burst from the smoke I'd inhaled, but I didn't know I'd been burned too until I woke up in the hospital with my hands and arms feeling like they'd been singed in hell. I kept asking for you, but you wouldn't come. I was afraid that this time I really had lost you." His arms tightened around her.

Tears streamed down her pale cheeks. "Oh, Erik, my darling, haven't you learned yet that you couldn't get rid of me if you tried? I tagged you for my own when I was eight years old, and I've loved you ever since."

For several minutes they sat quietly, holding each other and trying to piece together their shattered emotions. Finally Erik raised his head and looked at Colleen. Her fingers caressed his Nordic features, and she touched his lips with hers in a gentle kiss of love beyond passion. He smiled, and it went all the way to his eyes.

"I'd have gone crazy if I'd had to spend another night without you." He lifted her chin and ravaged her willing mouth.

"I love you, my warm and cuddly little wife," he continued. "How can you think I'd want Brett when I have you?"

She laid her cheek against his chest and could feel and hear his heart pounding. She was sure her own was

going to burst with happiness as she answered him honestly. "Because Brett was your first choice. You chose her for a wife, but got me by default. You even admitted you didn't love me when you asked me to marry you."

He muttered a sharp oath and caressed her other cheek with his bandaged hand. "I loved you, sweetheart. I've always loved you, but I was so used to thinking of you as Devin's cute little kid sister. I began to accept the fact that you were grown up when we started going out together after you graduated from college, but I wasn't prepared for the sexual feelings I felt for you. You were off-limits. I guess that's why I was so quick to take up with Brett when she appeared on the scene. She was older and had been around. The type I was used to, non-threatening and available."

"I'm nonthreatening and available," Colleen murmured.

Erik groaned. "If that's a proposition I accept."

But there was still something she had to confess.

She took a deep breath and began. "Darling, I have something to tell you."

He rubbed his cheek in her hair. "It's about time," he whispered.

She blinked and raised her head. "I beg your pardon?"

He grinned and kissed her. "I've been waiting two weeks for you to tell me you're pregnant."

Her mouth dropped open in disbelief. "How did you know?"

His green eyes twinkled with amusement. "Honey, my second best subject in school was numbers. I can even count, and when we make love for six full weeks I figure it's time to start shopping for diapers."

"But you didn't say anything," she accused. "I thought you hadn't noticed."

His arms came up to circle her waist and cuddle her to him. "Colleen, my love," he said, "when are you going to understand that I notice everything about you? I was a little hurt when you didn't share your suspicions with me, but I figured you wanted to wait until you were sure."

"I was going to tell you Friday night, but you never came home."

"Oh, God, sweetheart, I'm sorry." His voice throbbed with regret. "I really messed up good this time, didn't I?"

She nuzzled the hollow at the base of his throat. "That's all in the past, and we're going to forget about it," she said, and closed her eyes.

They rested quietly for a while in each other's arms until she whispered, "Erik."

"Mmm?"

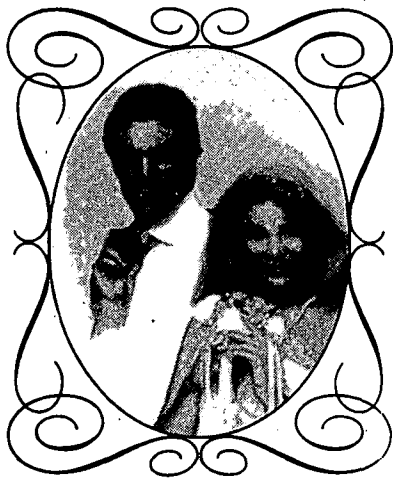
"You said your second best subject in school was numbers."

"Uh-huh."

"What was your first best subject?"

Erik chuckled and kissed her passionately. "The birds and the bees, of course. What else?"






DALLAS SCHULZE

The Morning After



The morning after Lacey's thirtieth-birthday bash, her head pounded, her eyes ached—and she awoke in a Vegas hotel room...next to a man claiming to be her husband!



“I’ve raised a daughter who’s going to be an old maid.” Mamie Newton’s voice was filled with despair.

“Nobody uses that term anymore, Mother.” Lacey smiled to take the edge off the words, but Mamie didn’t return her smile.

“I don’t mean to be a pushy mother, Lacey, but I worry about you. I never thought you’d get to your thirtieth birthday without at least being engaged a time or two. You don’t even have a special man in your life.”

“Having a man in your life doesn’t guarantee happiness. Look at the divorce rate these days.”

“You can’t dwell on the negative, honey. It’s just a matter of finding the right man, that’s all.” Thirty years in Southern California had not taken the Georgia from Mamie’s voice. The tea table, the perfectly decorated room, her mother’s soft lavender dress—all of it could have come out of a modern-day Tara.

Lacey stared at her beautiful, refined mother and wondered how she could have missed all the changes in the world around her. Lacey’s father had died when she was barely four. What her life might have been like if he’d lived, Lacey would never know. Mamie had raised her daughter as if they were in the Deep South.

“When I find the right man, I’ll be more than happy to latch on to him.”

“Well, you aren’t going to find him in that stuffy little boutique of yours.”

“Lacey’s Lovelies isn’t stuffy. It’s very chic. I notice you don’t hesitate to buy from me.”

Mamie waved her fingers, dismissing the shop. “I didn’t mean to criticize what you’ve done, sugar. I’m real proud of you, and your daddy would have been, too.”

An hour later, Lacey kissed her mother goodbye. Tucked into her purse was an exquisite pair of diamond earrings, Mamie’s birthday gift to her only child.

The problem with her mother was that it was impossible to get too angry with her meddling. Mamie genuinely wanted nothing but Lacey’s happiness. Still, her constant concern about Lacey’s single state did get on her nerves.

She settled behind the wheel of her car and soon turned onto Foothill Boulevard, then headed toward Pasadena.

Thirty. She was thirty years old today. It sounded so... old. All the magazine articles described it as the prime of a woman’s life—the time when she really came into her own. But right now Lacey felt slightly dusty and a little unwanted.

She turned into the parking garage beneath her apartment building. The elevator whisked her to the fourth floor. Her apartment was sleek, charming, beautifully decorated. She was proud of it. So why did it look so... empty?

She forced a smile. She was going to go out tonight, just as she’d planned. She and her friends were going to have a wonderful time celebrating her birthday.

"Thirty. I'm thirty." There. She'd said it out loud. It was no big deal. It was just another birthday.

She walked briskly into the bathroom and turned the water on in the tub. Leaning close to the mirror, she studied her face. It looked much the same to her. The same delicate bones, inherited from her mother. The same mouth, the lower lip just a bit too full. Her eyes were her best feature, wide set and a clear green. She smiled, counting the lines at the corners of her eyes. Was she aging too quickly? She'd given up the sun years ago, but maybe those careless teenage days at the beach had done too much damage....

She frowned and then quickly erased the expression. Frowning gave you lines. But so did smiling. Lacey stepped back and studied her reflection. No, the signs of deterioration weren't too obvious yet.

CAMERON MCCLEARY smoothed the fine sandpaper carefully across the wood. One of his better pieces, if he did say so himself. The fine grain of the oak suited the sweeping lines of the cradle. The Martins would be able to rock more than one baby in it. He'd built it to last for generations.

What would it be like to build a cradle for his own child? While the infant was easy to picture, its mother was something else.

He hadn't gotten to thirty-six without knowing a fair number of women. Once or twice he'd even thought he might be in love but, somehow, no relationship had developed into a commitment.

His brows came together over his summer blue eyes. He'd recently begun to feel a sense of something missing in his life. He finally had all the

work he could handle, yet there was a gap.

Stroking a rag over the cradle, he began to sense what the gap was. He wanted a family. He had to be crazy, after growing up in a family of seven. But he liked the chaos that went with a family—the noise, the arguments... the love.

Still, you didn't just walk out and buy a family. It was something that grew out of a mutual commitment. Sighing, he tossed the rag aside. These days, that commitment seemed a little hard to come by.

"Hey, not bad." Cam turned, startled by the voice.

James Robinson—Jimbo as long as Cam had known him—was the epitome of the hail-fellow-well-met. His mouth seemed destined to snap out witty comments, and his eyes viewed the world with a combination of good humor and cynicism.

Jimbo walked into the converted garage, studying the nearly completed cradle. "The best thing I've seen you do."

"You said that about the last six things you saw."

"What can I say? You just keep getting better."

Cam grinned. "Flattery will get you nowhere. What do you want?"

"Me? Why do you assume I want something?"

"Because you usually do." Cam leaned against the edge of the workbench, studying his friend.

Jimbo gave him a hurt look. "You wound me, you really do. I come here with an invitation for you, and you practically throw it back in my face."

"What kind of an invitation?"

"Dinner. Tonight. It's a friend's birthday. Lacey. You've heard me mention her."

"Sure. But I've never met her."

"No. But Lacey is a great gal. You'd like her. Besides, we're going out for Mexican. Picture it—enchiladas, burritos stuffed to the brim with shredded beef and cheese, margaritas."

Cam held up his hand, groaning. "Stop with the bribery. It sounds great, but I really can't."

"Why not? It looks like this project is about done. Come on. This is going to be a great evening. Frank and Lisa are going to be there and I'm taking Betts."

"Look, this Lacey isn't going to want a stranger along on her birthday dinner. Maybe another time."

"Lacey wouldn't mind a bit. Besides, this way we'll have even numbers if we go dancing. I don't want Lacey to feel like the odd man out at her own birthday."

"I don't think it's such a hot idea."

"I do. Come on, Cam. It will do you good to go out."

Cam looked at him, recognizing the gleam in his friend's eye. If he didn't agree, Jimbo would keep hounding him.

"All right. But if it's a disaster, don't say I didn't warn you."

Jimbo grinned. "It'll be fun. You'll see. This is going to be a night to remember."

LACEY PULLED into the parking lot of Los Arcos and edged into a spot that looked more suited to a motorcycle. But her door did open—barely. She hesitated, debating the wisdom of finding another place to park, but the lot looked pretty full.

Considering the way her day had gone so far, it shouldn't have surprised her that, when she slammed the car door, her skirt got caught in it. Jerked to an abrupt halt, Lacey looked over her shoulder with more resigna-

tion than irritation. It was a simple matter to open the door and release the swatch of pale green cotton.

She started to turn and felt her resignation slip. The skirt was full enough to catch in the door but not full enough for her to turn and unlock the door.

She twisted again, but there was no way she could get the key in the lock. She stood still, staring at the parking lot. The light was fading. Soon it would be dark and she'd still be standing here, like some bizarre form of modern art. *Woman and Car*.

The image was so absurd that she couldn't help laughing. Her smile turned into a full-throated chuckle.

"Excuse me. Are you aware that your dress is caught in the car door?"

The voice cut through Lacey's laughter and she turned her head, but the twilight made it difficult to see much beyond a pair of very broad masculine shoulders and the faint gleam of a smile.

"No kidding." Her smile took away any sarcasm. "I thought my dress was shrinking."

She felt his eyes sweep down to where her dress was caught and then back up to her face. "Can I help?"

"If you can reach the lock and open the door, I can move."

She passed the key back to him and a moment later, her skirt was free.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Any damage?"

Lacey brushed at her skirt and then looked up, wishing she could see more of his face. His voice was wonderfully deep and mellow.

"Nothing permanent."

"I'm glad I could help."

"Not as glad as I am, I'll bet." They were walking toward the restaurant as they talked, and when they stepped into the brightly lit entrance, her first reaction was relief that he wasn't

young enough to be her grandchild. Her second reaction was that he was almost too handsome—strong chin, beautiful mouth, wide brow and eyes the color of the bluest skies. His hair was light brown, sun-streaked and casually combed. He was thirty-five or six, at a guess.

She flushed when she realized that he was studying her with just as much interest. "Well, thanks again."

"You're welcome." His eyes were intense, and Lacey had the impression that he wanted to say something else, though she wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"I think I'll visit the ladies' room before I meet my friends. See if I can repair some of the damage." She gestured to her skirt and smiled vaguely.

By the time she'd wiped away as much of the mark as she could, she was cursing herself. The man was gorgeous. And he seemed nice. Why hadn't she waited to see what he wanted to say?

Los Arcos was always packed on Friday nights. Lacey stared at the crowd and felt her spirits sink. They all looked to be having so much fun. Couples, families—no one was here alone. And they all looked young.

She considered turning and slinking out, but Jimbo had seen her and with his usual subtlety was waving his arms to attract her attention.

"Lacey! Happy birthday! We were beginning to think you weren't going to show."

"I'm not *that* late." Lacey accepted his hug and smiled at Frank and Lisa. "Hi."

"Lacey, I want you to meet Betts."

Lacey's heart sank. If Betts was with Jimbo, the other man at the table must be unattached.

Jimbo gave them a moment before making the final introduction. "And

this is Cameron McCleary. Cam, this is Lacey."

She really looked at the other man for the first time, and felt her color rise until her cheeks were on fire. He was none other than her parking-lot rescuer.

"Hello again." He held out his hand, and Lacey put hers into it, oddly reluctant. His palm felt hard and warm, callused as if he worked with his hands.

"Hi."

"You two know each other?" Jimbo's sharp eyes missed nothing.

"Not exactly." It was Cam who answered. "Lacey was having some trouble with her car and I helped a bit." He shrugged and Lacey gave him a grateful smile.

"I hope you don't mind that I've sort of crashed your birthday celebration. Jimbo was pretty insistent." Cam's smile made her feel as if he saw only her in the room. Lacey warned herself against reading too much into it.

Her smile was a masterpiece of casual as she said, "He was probably downright obnoxious."

Jimbo shrugged and returned to his chair, leaving Lacey to settle herself next to Cam. She tried not to notice how close his thigh was, how large he seemed.

Frank leaned forward. "So, Lacey, how does thirty feel? You going to survive?"

She forced a grin. "I haven't kicked the bucket yet. But mother thinks I'm doomed to be an old maid."

Everyone laughed, but Cam threw her a look, his eyes sharp, and Lacey wondered if he'd heard something in her voice that shouldn't have been there. Then the waiter set an enormous margarita in front of her.

"Okay. Time for a birthday toast." Jimbo reached for his glass and everyone followed suit. "To Lacey. May all your birthdays be spent in such charming company." Lacey couldn't help but smile at him.

Everyone touched their glass to hers, adding their good wishes. Cam was the last. As their glasses touched, Lacey met his eyes.

"To the prettiest old maid I've ever met." His quiet tone took the sting out of her mother's words.

"Thank you, I think." She sipped her margarita, her eye still on Cam's, and somehow the evening didn't seem so bad.

It was impossible to stay depressed when everyone else was in such high spirits. Lacey couldn't have said if it was the tequila or the company, but her depression lifted and suddenly turning thirty wasn't such a big deal.

She ate too much, drank more than she usually did and tried not to stare at Cam. The man was so handsome. That he was also a nice guy made him almost too perfect a package.

"We should go out and do something exciting." That was Lisa, her voice ever-so-slightly slurred. Her husband looked at her, his expression indulgent.

"Like what?"

"Well, I don't know." She crunched a tortilla chip. "Something different. We should do something fun. After all, a woman turns thirty only once."

"We should go to Las Vegas." It was Betts's breathy voice.

All eyes turned to Lacey. She stared at her friends. Nobody drove all that way to celebrate a birthday. You made plans. You spent the weekend. It was an absurd idea.

"I have an aunt in Las Vegas. She's a terrible gossip. I avoid her at all costs."

Everyone considered the matter solemnly. "You don't have to go see her," said Frank.

Lacey considered. If she said no, they might all go home. And then she'd have to go home. And Cam would go home and she might not see him again. The tequila made her thinking fuzzy, but she knew she didn't want to go home.

"Las Vegas sounds great."

Before Lacey knew what was happening, she was wedged into the back seat of Jimbo's 1955 Cadillac convertible and they were on their way to Nevada.

Jimbo was behind the wheel, stone-cold sober, since he never drank. Betts was snuggled up next to him. It was the back seat that was a trifle crowded, with four.

At first Lisa was going to sit in front and Frank in the back. So Lacey had gotten into the back seat next to Cam. At the last minute, Lisa decided to sit next to her husband. Lacey had ended up practically in Cam's lap—a surprisingly comfortable spot.

Lacey found herself snuggling closer to Cam, perfectly content to have his arm around her shoulders, his thigh pressed against hers. Funny, she'd always kept a bit of a distance physically between herself and other people. She wasn't the hugging type. But it felt right to have Cam's long body so close. In fact, it felt rather nice.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a warning bell sounded, but she ignored it. Tonight she wasn't going to think about anything but having a good time.

BY FOUR a.m., Lacey had discovered that Cam's arms felt every bit as strong as they looked. Crowded onto the tiny

dance floor, he held her close and she didn't object.

She tilted her head back, her eyes meeting his in the dim light. "You're a good dancer."

"Thanks. You're pretty good yourself. I got a lot of practice dancing with my sisters."

"Sisters? How many?"

"Three sisters and three brothers."

Lacey's brow furrowed. "That's six."

"Seven, counting me."

"There's only one of me." She frowned. "Maybe that's why my mother worries about me so much." But the margaritas and the wine she'd had before they danced combined to make her melancholy a distant experience. Somehow, held close to Cam's broad chest, she just couldn't be depressed.

The music was a ballad that talked of love forever lost. Cam's hand moved slowly up her back. Lacey felt a slow shiver work its way up her spine, an awareness she'd never felt before. His feet barely moved, and she couldn't drag her eyes from his. The room was lost in the brilliant blue of his eyes.

As his head lowered, she noticed vaguely that there was something wrong with her breathing. But it didn't seem important as her lips parted in soft anticipation.

When his mouth touched hers, it was as if they'd kissed before, as if he'd held her before. Her arms slid upward to circle his neck as her mouth softened beneath the pressure of his.

He tasted of wine. His mouth was warm and firm, coaxing, hungry, promising. Lacey's head spun with the pleasure of it. Tomorrow she might blame the wine, but tonight she had a sense of destiny. This moment, his kiss, had to happen.

Her lashes fluttered and her eyes opened slowly as Cam drew away. On the dark dance floor no one seemed to have noticed what had just happened. No one else seemed to feel the ground rocking under their feet.

After that, the night grew hazier. When she tried to recall it afterward, her memories came like glimpses of countryside seen through train windows.

They'd danced some more. Another stolen kiss or two had followed. There'd been more wine and a great deal of laughter. Then a sharp clear memory of a bouquet of neon flowers. There was a volley of cheers and applause, and she had a vague sense that she was the center of this approval, and then the noise and lights were gone.

She and Cam were alone, somewhere dim and private. Lacey was floating on a sea of pleasure. No cares, just wonderful liquid sensations that filled her, sweeping everything else aside. There was someone with her. Someone strong and warm who held her, kept her safe.

She'd drifted to sleep, aware that everything had changed in a sudden, cataclysmic way.

She might regret it later, but for now she'd never felt so content.

*

THE NOISE boomed through Lacey's aching head, dragging her from sleep and forcing her to move. Movement was not a good idea.

She groped for the source of the hideous sound. The phone. That was it. She dragged the receiver toward her.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded as fuzzy as she felt.

"Lacey? Honey, is that you? Darlin', this is your mother. I know I

shouldn't have called, but I just couldn't wait to scold you." But Mamie sounded as if she was about to burst with pleasure. Lacey tuned out the ecstatic ramblings, uncertain of their cause. She studied her surroundings through slitted eyes. Her entire body ached.

A hotel room. A luxurious hotel room. She shifted her legs and was rewarded with a rolling sensation. She was in a water bed. What on earth was she doing here? She hated water beds.

A sense of disaster gnawed at her. There was something she should remember. She looked down to find that she was nude. That was odd. She never slept in the nude.

Mamie's voice droned on in her ear, but Lacey was no longer listening. Someone had just groaned. Someone in the same bed.

Lacey turned her head, the receiver still at her ear. That someone was tanned, muscular and very bare. Her wide eyes stopped at the sheet that was draped low on a pair of masculine hips.

There was a man in bed with her.

She grabbed for the sheet, drawing it up over her bare breasts. Now bits and pieces of last night flashed through her aching head. The mad drive to Las Vegas, lots of drinks, and then things became blurrier. She remembered dancing with a man whose eyes were bluer than a summer sky.

And there were other memories, a little mistier, but enough to drive the color from her cheeks.

There was another groan, and the bed's other occupant turned over, exposing an endless expanse of bare chest. His lashes flickered and then lifted. His eyes were still blue, but now they were bloodshot. And her mother was on the phone sounding as if she'd just won the lottery.

"Lacey? Honey? Are you there?" Mamie's voice had a worried edge and Lacey responded automatically.

"I'm here, Mother."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so happy for you I could just cry. Why didn't you tell me about him? Phoebe says he's just the handsomest thing. What's his name, sugar?"

"Name? His name?" The ache in her head intensified. What on earth was her mother talking about? What did her awful Aunt Phoebe have to do with any of this?

"Cam... er... Cam..."

"Cameron McCleary, for what it's worth." The words were muffled by the pillow.

"Cameron McCleary, for what—" She parroted.

"Oh, honey, that's a lovely name. You'll bring him to meet me when you get home, won't you?"

"Ah... if you'd like."

"Sugar, I'm dyin' to meet him. We'll have a wonderful reception just as soon as you're settled."

"Of course." Lacey gave up trying to make any sense out of it. If this was all a dream, then none of it would make sense anyway. "I really have to go now, Mother."

"Of course. I just couldn't wait to congratulate you."

"Talk to you soon."

She set the receiver down, still hoping to wake up and find that none of this had happened.

She jumped when Cam suddenly rolled over and sat up. He groaned, burying his head in his hands. He was too large, too bare, too male.

"I'm going to die." He said it with calm certainty. She knew just what he meant. Her own head still felt as if it might roll off her shoulders at any moment.

Cam turned his head, his eyes catching hers, and Lacey stared at him, trying to think of something witty to say. Nothing came to mind.

Clearly someone had to take charge of the situation. They couldn't sit here all day. Lacey's eyes skittered around the room, looking for her clothes.

Her cheeks flushed as she saw them scattered across the carpet, intimately entwined with a pair of jeans, a shirt and some male underwear. Things were well out of reach.

She glanced at her companion. "Don't open your eyes."

"If I do, they're going to fall out of my head."

Lacey swung her feet off the bed, and her left foot landed on something crackly. She leaned down and picked up a sheet of heavy parchment paper. As she glanced at it, her muffled shriek echoed in Cam's pounding head.

Lacey turned slowly and handed him the paper. "Read it." She sounded like the voice of doom.

It was a printed form, black ink on thick ivory paper. At the top, in elaborate script were written the words: Little Chapel of Happiness in the Desert Dell.

He was holding a marriage certificate. The names were clear and easily read: Cameron David McCleary. Lacey Anne Newton. It took several seconds for the significance of those names to sink in.

When it did, he shut his eyes, absorbing the impact. Then he opened his eyes and looked at Lacey. He dropped the certificate on the rumpled covers.

"Good morning, Mrs. McCleary." The joke was weak, but it didn't deserve the appalled expression it got.

She looked at him, skimming over his bare chest. She didn't have anything on. He didn't have anything on. The implications boggled the mind.

Cam's thoughts were following a similar path, and he had a sudden vivid memory of skin softer than silk. A sweet response that had seemed so right at the time. And something else.

"Look, I—"

"Obviously, that's a fake." Lacey pointed to the form. "I mean we wouldn't have—just—" She waved her hand at the paper.

"Gotten married?" Cam finished helpfully.

"Right. People just don't do that, no matter how much they've had to drink."

"Oh, I don't know. People have done stranger things."

"Well, I haven't. I don't do things like this." She waved her hand, indicating herself, the bed and him.

Cam grinned, beginning to enjoy himself despite the headache. "You mean you don't wake up in strange hotel rooms with men you barely know?"

"No, I don't."

"That's good to know. I'd hate to think that I'd married a woman of loose moral character and easy virtue."

Lacey's eyes turned frosty. "We are not married. And my virtue is—was—unimpeachable."

Cam sobered. God knows, the latter was the truth. It was the first item that was still in question.

"This says we're married." He indicated the paper.

"Obviously that's a fake." She spoke firmly.

Cam shrugged, resisting the urge to argue further.

"If you'll close your eyes," she said, "I could get my clothes." Cam could see she didn't share his sanguine attitude toward the situation.

"Sure. I won't look."

Lacey eased off the bed and hurriedly snatched up her clothes. Throwing one last glance over her shoulder, she scurried into the bathroom and shut the door behind her with a feeling of relief.

She drew a deep breath, forced herself to walk to the sink, and turned on the tap. If she still retained some hope that this was a dream, it was shattered when splashing cold water on her face didn't wake her up.

The marriage certificate had to be a fake. It wasn't possible that she'd married a man she'd just met. On the heels of that thought came a dim memory of someone saying that she and Cam ought to get married, that it would solve all their problems. Everyone had laughed, but after a few glasses of wine, maybe the idea hadn't sounded so funny.

Lacey sank down on the edge of the tub, one arm resting on the sink, her fingers trailing in the cold water. She stared at the fluffy white rug at her feet. Other memories were creeping in. They'd played the slot machines for a while and then they'd gone dancing. He'd kissed her. That was surprisingly vivid. After that, things grew fuzzy until the sudden, sharp image of a neon bouquet of flowers hanging over a pale pink altar and a solemn-faced man looking at her, looking at *them*.

Lacey swallowed a sob. She'd really done it. She'd actually married Cameron McCleary—a man she'd met only hours ago and knew nothing about. She'd slept with him. Made love with him. Her memories on that point were even more vague, but they were enough.

She leaned her forehead against the cold tile, squeezing her eyes shut to hold back the tears. Crying wasn't going to solve anything now. A solitary tear, which trailed forlornly down her

cheek, was dashed away. She stood up, drawing in a deep breath before facing her reflection again in the mirror. One thing she'd learned by the ripe old age of thirty: there was no erasing what had already been done.

Obviously this situation had to be straightened out. Sitting in the bathroom moping about it wasn't the answer. They'd had too much to drink, and they'd done something stupid. But what was done could be undone.

Lacey might have felt a little better if she'd been able to read Cam's thoughts on the situation as he swung his legs out of bed and reached for his underwear and jeans. His calm facade cracked in several places.

A man didn't get to be thirty-six without doing some stupid things, but this certainly took the cake. He jerked the jeans on, trying to figure out just how it had happened. There wasn't an answer, and he cursed softly as he reached for his shirt.

He strode to the window and stared out at the sprawl that was Las Vegas. In daylight, it lacked the glitter that made it seem almost magical at night.

He swung around as Lacey stepped out onto the plush gray carpeting.

"Hi. How's your head?"

"Okay. It's not hurting much. How's yours?"

"Better." He smiled. "I haven't had a hangover in a long time. I'd forgotten how awful they are. I guess that will teach me not to drink too much."

"Me, too." Lacey edged her way into the room, trying not to look at his bare chest or the way his jeans clung to his legs.

Cam slanted her a shrewd glance, and she had the feeling that he saw through her casual facade to the trembling little girl inside.

Just beyond Lacey, on the bed, he could see the corner of their marriage

certificate. He didn't really doubt that it was genuine. So, he was married. He felt detached, as if he were watching a play. But there were things they had to talk about.

"Lacey—"

"We need—"

They both started at the same moment.

"Ladies first," Cam said.

"I was just going to say that I think we need to talk."

"Funny, that's exactly what I was going to say."

His tone invited her to relax, but the best she could manage was a weak half smile.

A knock on the door made them both jump.

"Room service." The voice was muffled.

Cam shrugged in answer to Lacey's questioning glance. *He* hadn't called room service. He opened the door to a waiter with a room-service trolley.

"Your coffee and croissants, Mr. McCleary." He wheeled the cart in, and behind him was another visitor, his broad face wreathed in a cheerful smile, his stocky figure encased in a crisp shirt and jeans, a newspaper under one arm.

Jimbo grinned. "So, how's the happy couple?"

"You!" Cam made the word sound like a curse. His long fingers closed over Jimbo's heavy shoulder as he all but dragged him into the room.

"You low-life scum. You did this on purpose. I suppose you think it's funny."

The waiter backed away from the table, his eyes uneasy, but Jimbo wasn't dazed by Cam's fierce tone. He took the bill and signed it with a flourish, then handed it to the waiter with a crisp greenback. When the man was gone, Jimbo spoke.

"Funny? Why? And by the way, it's customary to offer a greeting beyond 'low-life scum.' Something like 'Good morning' might be appropriate. Good morning, Lacey."

"Good morning," she responded automatically.

"There. You see, Cam? That's how it's done. You really should work on it."

"The only thing I feel like working on right now is you."

Jimbo blinked. "It's hardly my fault if you've got a hangover. You should have some coffee. It'll improve your mood."

The casual comment broke the spell that had been holding Lacey speechless.

"Improve his mood?" Her voice rose almost to a shriek. "What about my mood? How do you think *we* feel?" She waved one hand, linking herself and Cam with the gesture. "I woke up this morning in bed with a man I'd just met. I had to talk to my mother before I'd figured out what was going on and then—then I step on this."

She snatched the marriage certificate off the bed. "And that's another thing. How could you call my mother and tell her about this... insanity?"

"I didn't call your mother," Jimbo told her calmly.

"Ha! So how did she find out about it?"

"Maybe someone saw the picture and called her with the news. I brought you a copy," Jimbo said, as he pulled the newspaper out from under his arm with a flourish. "I knew you'd want one for your wedding album."

The camera flash had caught them in a moment of laughter. Her head was tilted back against Cam's shoulder, her eyes smiling up into his. He was in profile to her.

The picture was charming, romantic, and made Lacey want to scream. The photo headline stated: Love Blooms in the Desert.

"Why did they print this photo?" Cam's question was suspicious, but Jimbo shrugged.

"Newspapers call it human interest. It's a change from all the bad news. I didn't bribe the photographer."

"This still doesn't explain how Lacey's mother found out." Lacey glanced up at Cam, pleased by the protective tone of his voice.

"Didn't you say you had an aunt in town?" Jimbo asked.

Lacey shut her eyes. "God, yes. Aunt Phoebe. A hideous woman, and Mother did mention her this morning. You know, I keep thinking this is all a nightmare and I'm going to wake up any minute safe in my own bed."

"It's hardly my idea of good fun, either," Cam said.

"Do I smell trouble in paradise so soon?" Jimbo's arch tone brought two pairs of bloodshot eyes to bear on him.

"If you want to live to see another day, James, I suggest you resist making any more smart remarks."

"Hey, why do I get the blame?"

"Because you were the only one who was sober last night. You should have put a stop to this," Cam told him.

"I tried. Believe me." Jimbo moved to the table and poured two cups of coffee, handing them each one.

"You didn't try hard enough," Cam told him sourly.

"What was I supposed to do? Knock you out? You were determined to get married. All I could do was offer my services as best man." He took a sip of his own coffee. "It was a lovely service."

Lacey's fingers gripped the coffee cup so tightly that Cam half expected to see it crack. Her eyes reflected all the

distress he should be feeling and wasn't.

"What's done is done. We're married and that's all there is to it. There's no sense in trying to place the blame." She went on, "Obviously, now we have to figure out how to undo this mess. It shouldn't be a problem. We'll just get an annulment."

"Why?" Jimbo's question echoed in the quiet room. "What's so awful about being married? Don't tell me you weren't attracted to each other last night. It was obvious." He lifted his cup to Lacey. "It would get your mother off your back."

"We hardly know each other. Has that occurred to you?" Lacey asked.

Jimbo shrugged. "So what? You get to know each other after the wedding." He picked up a croissant. "I'll leave you two to talk. But think about it. It might not be such a bad arrangement. Besides, I think you're perfect for each other."

The door shut behind him, leaving Cam and Lacey alone.

"It's nothing personal." Lacey was trying to sound as reasonable as possible under the circumstances. "But we don't know each other. People who don't know each other don't get married."

"Usually, they don't. But we've already done it. Don't you think it might be fate? Kismet?"

"How about too much to drink?" Lacey's tone was all the firmer for the fact that, looking into those blue eyes, she found herself wanting to believe in kismet.

"Maybe. But now that it's done, we should think about it before we go off half-cocked again."

Lacey took a quick swallow of coffee. Now Cam was suggesting that they stay married. It made no sense at all. And she was going to tell him that.

"Think about it, Lacey. Is it really such an awful idea? I don't know about you, but I haven't had a whole lot of luck finding someone I want to share my life with."

"Yes, but this isn't the way to do it."

"Why not? I'm thirty-six. You're thirty. We're not kids anymore, and here we are, already married. Why not explore the possibilities?"

Lacey wished she was home safe and sound in her own bed.

She stole a glance at Cam. He looked so relaxed now, sprawled in the chair. As if nothing ever disturbed him.

You could really lean on a man like that.

She didn't need anyone to lean on. She was a strong woman, proud of her independence. Had a home of her own.

But wouldn't it be nice to have someone to come home to?

She scowled into her coffee cup. She was actually considering this madness. Was the coffee drugged?

She shook her head. "No. No, it would never work."

Cam drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I think we need to talk about something."

"We don't," Lacey said quickly. "Let's just get an annulment as quickly as possible."

"An annulment is only possible when a marriage hasn't been consummated."

Cam's quiet words struck her with the force of a blow. It was the first reference either of them had made to having done more than just share a bed the night before.

"Okay, a divorce then."

"Lacey." Cam's voice was quiet, but something in it drew her eyes to his face. "Lacey, we really need to talk about this. I'm not in the habit of

marrying a woman, making love to her and then divorcing her the next day. Especially when she happens to have been a virgin."

Lacey's eyes jerked up to his and then away. She felt her skin flush and then pale. She didn't want to deal with this. But Cam was watching her, waiting.

"It's no big deal." As soon as the mumbled words were out, she felt like a fool.

"No big deal?" Cam questioned. "Lacey, the first time a person makes love is generally a fairly big deal. Since you've waited this long, it must have been important to you."

How was she supposed to explain why she hadn't slept with a man in all of her thirty years? It wasn't that she hadn't been tempted a time or two. She'd just never found someone who made her want to make that commitment.

She became aware that Cam was still watching her.

"Look, I don't see why we're talking about this. It's over and done with and it can't be changed."

"No, but maybe we could build on it. Come on, tell me you didn't feel an attraction between us when we met."

"An attraction, yes, but that doesn't mean I wanted to marry you!" she cried.

"So, we didn't plan it very carefully. But we might have ended up married anyway."

Lacey opened her mouth to deny the possibility and found herself without a thing to say. She *had* been attracted to Cam. Was it possible he was right?

"No. It's crazy. Besides, that's not a good excuse to stay together," she said at last.

"Why not?" Cam persisted. "Why not give it a shot now that we've gone this far?"

"No." But she was weakening. She could hear it. So could Cam.

"It doesn't have to be crazy. We're sane adults. If we go about this right, it could work." His tone grew more serious. "Lacey, I wouldn't expect anything from you until you were ready for it. My house has a spare bedroom and I wouldn't pressure you."

She blushed, keeping her eyes down. She appreciated his reassurance, but she hadn't needed it. She trusted him.

"You really want this, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

Something flickered in his eyes, gone too quickly for her to identify. "My mother always told me that I have a bad habit of refusing to admit when I've made a mistake. Maybe that's why I want to give this a try."

It was a crazy idea, and yet... Lacey was thirty and she hadn't even come close to getting married. Now here she was, married to a man who seemed like the answer to a dream. Not only was he attractive, he was nice, intelligent and considerate. And he had a sense of humor.

She took a deep breath and looked at Cam. "Okay." She couldn't get out anything beyond that one word.

"Great." Cam's slow smile made her knees quiver. "We'll make it work, Lacey. I've got a feeling about this."

Her laughter was shaky. "So do I, but I doubt if it's the same one. I must be crazy even to consider this."

He held his hand out. Lacey stared at it for a long moment before putting her hand in his. Cam's fingers closed around hers, warm and strong.

"The groom should always kiss the bride," he told her.

"Don't you think you did that last night?"

"That doesn't count. This is our real beginning." He tilted her head back until her eyes met his. "Do you mind if I kiss you, Lacey?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head.

His mouth touched hers gently, asking more than demanding. His arms circled her back, pulling her closer. She felt surrounded but not trapped. Sheltered in his strength. It was a kiss of exploration, as if he understood that they needed time.

But there was passion underlying the gentleness. Lacey could feel it in her bones. She heard a soft sigh of protest as Cam moved back and was only distantly aware it was her own.

Her lashes quivered a moment and then lifted, staring up into eyes the color of a summer day.

Her gaze dropped away from his. She hadn't planned on melting against him like that. She wasn't sure if it was lust or insanity that made her suddenly feel more hopeful about this crazy plan.

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THE FLIGHT to Los Angeles was quiet. The closer they got to home, the more surreal the past twenty-four hours seemed. Lacey stole a quick glance at Cam. He looked so calm. He seemed to be taking this whole situation in stride, as if he woke up married to a stranger every day.

Once they arrived in Los Angeles, it didn't take long to rent a car. Cam drove, for which Lacey was grateful. Her thoughts were still too scattered for negotiating the freeway traffic.

They'd spoken very little since boarding the plane in Las Vegas. As Cam eased the car onto the San Diego Freeway, she found herself watching his hands. A flash of memory re-

mind her of how they had felt on her skin.

"You know, I don't even know what you do for a living," Lacey said.

"I'm a carpenter, more or less. I make furniture."

"It sounds interesting." Privately, she wondered if one could earn a living that way. Some of her doubt must have shown. Cam smiled.

"I make a decent living. Enough to support a wife."

"I don't need anyone to support me, thank you. Anyway, I would still keep my shop."

"Why not? I gather your shop does very well."

"Yes, it does." Lacey spoke with pride in her voice.

"Maybe I should give up my work and let you support me in the manner to which I'd like to become accustomed." He grinned, and Lacey smiled reluctantly. There was something wrong with this picture. They shouldn't be talking and laughing like old friends. Where was all the angst and uncertainty?

IT SEEMED typical of Cam that he found a parking place right outside her apartment building. They were usually as rare as hen's teeth. Lacey had started trying to imagine Cam's reaction to her home even before they'd pulled off the freeway. Somehow, his tall form and her intensely modern decorating refused to connect in her mind.

She'd spent months fixing up this place, studying magazines, getting just the proper air of chic. It had cost a small fortune, but it looked exactly like a picture in *House and Garden*. She looked at the rich scarlet and gold tones and then looked at Cam.

"You hate it, don't you?"

"No. No. I mean, it's very... nice. It looks interesting. My place isn't anything like this." Cam studied the metal sculpture, tilting his head to the side.

Lacey looked at him and then at the room and her mouth quivered. He looked so out of place. No, the room did. Funny, she'd lived with this for almost three years and never realized how superficial it was. Her quiver became a chuckle. He so obviously hated it. Cam cocked one eyebrow.

"Is it something I said?"

"Sort of. You really hate this place, don't you?"

He looked around and then his shoulders lifted in a sheepish shrug. "It's really not my cup of tea, but it does look like you spent a lot of time on it. I'm not sure you're going to like my place. It's simpler."

"You mean it's not gaudy?"

"I didn't say that. This isn't gaudy. It's just very...bright." Lacey laughed and he shrugged again. "Sorry. Like I said, it's not my cup of tea."

"I'm not all that sure it's mine. Would you like some coffee or something to eat?"

"No, thanks. I ought to be going. I could use a hot shower and you'd probably like some time alone."

"I...yes, I guess I would." She couldn't explain, even to herself, why the idea didn't hold more appeal.

"You won't change your mind, will you?"

Her eyes swept up to meet Cam's. Slowly she shook her head. "I won't change my mind."

And she knew she wouldn't.

"Good. Listen, why don't I pick you up for lunch tomorrow and we can discuss living arrangements?"

"Okay." She was surprised by the strength of her desire to see him again. She gave him the address of the shop

and then followed him to the door. Cam hesitated, his eyes lingering on her mouth. For a moment, Lacey thought he was going to kiss her. She wasn't sure whether or not to be disappointed when he didn't.

CAM'S HOME was, as he'd promised, nothing like Lacey's apartment. It was a large white stucco house with a red-tile roof set in the foothills above Glendale.

Lacey turned her car into the brick driveway, parking beneath the huge live oak that dominated the front yard. She turned off the engine.

She was really here. Over the past week, she'd never quite believed she'd get to this point. But now she was seized by a sudden attack of nerves. What was she doing here?

Before she had a chance to answer that question, she saw Cam walking toward her.

"Are you coming in, or are you going to stay there permanently?" He rested one hand on top of the car and leaned down to look through the window.

Lacey pried her hands off the steering wheel and smiled. "I was just getting a feel for the place."

"It's not huge but it's quiet. And if you don't like it, we'll work something out." Cam opened the car door for her.

"It's a pretty neighborhood. Have you lived here long?"

"Eight years. My grandparents left it to me. I thought about selling, but the garage was already set up as a workshop and it was a good location, so I stayed."

"I'm sure I'll like it."

"I hope so." There was no mistaking the sincerity in his words, and she felt some of her tension fade. He'd re-

minded her that she wasn't in this alone.

"You can't have brought much with you." Cam eyed her small blue compact car as she reached in for her suitcase.

"Mostly clothes. Since the shop isn't far from the apartment, I thought I'd move a little bit at a time. I've still got three months to go on my lease, anyway."

And she'd have an escape if she needed it. If the thought occurred to Cam, he didn't say anything. He reached past her and lifted the suitcase out easily.

"I fixed up a room for you."

"Thanks." Lacey had to clear her throat to get the word out. At the front door, Cam stepped back, waiting for her to enter.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the small hallway. She took in the polished hardwood floors, white plaster walls and chunky leather furniture that filled the living room. A fireplace with a rustic wooden mantel dominated one wall, and windows filled two more. Maple cabinets flanked the fireplace, wrought-iron hardware setting off the warm wood.

"Think you can live with it?" Cam asked.

She nodded slowly. "I like it a lot. It's very... honest. Nothing fussy or overdone."

"I'm glad you like it." Lacey saw the pleasure in his eyes. The knowledge warmed her.

"I'll show you to your room and then we can take the grand tour, if you'd like." Before she could reply, there was a strange scrabbling noise she couldn't identify.

"Derwent." That was all Cam had time for before a furry bundle hurtled around a corner and rushed toward them. He skidded to a halt, nails slip-

ping on the smooth floors, and gave a high-pitched bark.

Cam scooped him up in one hand.

"This is Derwent. He actually owns this house, or so he'd have you believe. I hope you like dogs."

"I don't know. I've never had much to do with them."

"Well, Derwent is spoiled rotten, but he's friendly. He's a Yorkshire terrier. They're very smart."

She reached out to scratch behind one ear. Derwent's tiny body quivered with pleasure.

"He'll probably be your slave for life. Actually, he likes just about everybody. Except Jimbo."

"A dog with good taste," Lacey commented dryly. She still hadn't forgiven Jimbo for his part in this insane situation.

"By the way, Jimbo came by yesterday," Cam told her. He picked up her suitcase again and they headed toward the rear of the house.

"Did you tell him we were going to give things a try?" she asked.

"I told him. He said he was sure we were made for each other." Cam set her bag down in the room. "He said he's always right about things like that."

"Maybe he should hang out a shingle. Matchmaker With Excellent Track Record. Heaven knows, Southern California has enough palm readers and channelers. We could probably use a good old-fashioned matchmaker."

Lacey slipped by him and into the bedroom. The room had the same restful feel as the rest of the house, a feeling she was beginning to associate with Cam.

"Do you suppose he'll ask us for a testimonial?" Cam leaned in the doorway, watching her.

Lacey looked at him, trying to ignore the way her pulse seemed to pick up speed when he was around.

"I don't know. I suppose he'll have to wait and see if he was right again."

"I suppose we all will." Cam grinned. "I'll give you a chance to settle in. I'm going to go start dinner."

"Do you need help?"

"Not tonight. But I'll let you take your turn in the kitchen."

"Gee, thanks."

Cam grinned at her dry tone, but he didn't linger.

With a sigh, she lifted her suitcase onto the bed and opened it. Just take one day at a time. That's what she'd promised herself she'd do. It was all she *could* do.

CAM PAUSED in the kitchen doorway the next morning, savoring the scene before him. Lacey had her back to him, working at the counter. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail, a spill of golden blond, and she wore faded jeans that molded the smooth lines of her hips in a way that invited a man's hand to test those same curves. A red-and-gray striped top completed the outfit. She looked deliciously attractive.

He was surprised by the strength of his pleasure in seeing her so at home in his kitchen. There was something so right about the picture, as if she was just what the house had been waiting for to make it complete.

He must have made some sound, or perhaps Lacey felt his eyes on her, because she turned and their eyes met.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning." Her face was flushed. She brushed self-consciously at a smear of flour on her cheek, only adding to it. "I heard the shower and thought I'd make some breakfast. I

hope you don't mind me making myself at home."

"This is your home. Besides, that looks like biscuits. I haven't had real biscuits in ages. Where did you get the recipe?"

Lacey turned back to the counter and finished rolling out the soft dough. "I don't need a recipe. Mother taught me to make biscuits before she taught me how to read. A Southern lady should always know how to cook." Unconsciously, her voice took on a soft drawl.

"You seem very California."

Lacey's laughter held a touch of sadness. "I am, but Mother did her best to drum the old South into me. I can play piano and cook and sew. I know precisely how to hold a teacup and I can make a cucumber sandwich."

"Cucumber sandwich? Sounds peculiar."

"You'll probably get to try one this afternoon. Mother is bound to have made them for us. Unless you've changed your mind about going to meet her. I love her dearly, but she can be a little hard to take sometimes. She's very good at pushing you around. Very politely, of course."

Cam grinned down at her, and brushed the flour from her cheek.

"I think I can stand up to that. I'm tougher than I look."

Lacey was not completely reassured. Cam had never seen her mother in action. She wasn't worried about whether they would like each other. That was practically a foregone conclusion. Mamie would adore Cam because he was male and presentable and he'd rescued her daughter from spinsterhood. Cam would adore Mamie because men always adored Mamie.

What bothered Lacey was the idea of watching her mother twist Cam

around her little finger the way she had always done with anything male. It hadn't mattered much in the past, but somehow, with Cam, it did.

HE WAS AWARE of Lacey's tension as they stepped onto the porch of her mother's house in San Marino. She pushed the bell and stood staring at the front door.

They had only a moment to wait. Cam had half expected to see a giant of a woman with a rolling pin in one hand and a book of etiquette in the other, not this petite person who was opening the screen door.

"Lacey! Honey, it's so good to see you." Mamie hugged her daughter and then turned bright blue eyes on Cam. "You must be Cameron. I can't tell you how pleased I am to meet you." She held out her arms, and Cam stepped forward to embrace his mother-in-law.

"Now y'all come in. I've got a little bite prepared."

Amused, Cam followed the two women inside, wondering if Mamie realized she hadn't allowed him to say a word.

"Cameron, you just settle yourself on the sofa. Lacey, you sit next to him. I want to see the two of you together."

Cam's eyes danced as he sat down. He could see what Lacey meant. In the nicest possible way, Mamie reminded him of a general positioning his troops.

"Now, tell me all about how you two met. I've already told Lacey what I think of her keeping this from me."

"I'm afraid that's my fault, Mrs. Newton," Cameron said. "I was a little uneasy about meeting Lacey's family. Now I'm sorry we didn't meet sooner. You're just as Lacey described you."

Lacey's arm twitched where it rested against his.

"Well, I'm just glad we've had a chance to meet at last. But I was more than a little surprised when Lacey got married without even telling me." Her words held gentle reproach.

"Mother—"

"I'll have to take the blame for that, too, Mrs. Newton." Cam didn't have any qualms at all about interrupting. When it came to her mother, Lacey clearly needed help. "I convinced Lacey that we should get married the way we did. There we were in Las Vegas, and the chance just seemed too good to pass up. I bullied her shamefully."

He slid his arm around Lacey's rigid shoulders, hugging her close. He didn't dare look at her face.

"You must call me Mamie, Cameron. I hope the ceremony wasn't too stark. I'd always pictured Lacey in a white dress walkin' down the aisle at a church."

"Well, it wasn't quite that romantic, but we'll always treasure the memories, won't we, Lacey?"

Since neither of them had a clear memory of the event, Lacey was hard put to manage more than a nod. She hoped her mother would take her flushed face as a sign of her adoration for Cam and not of what it really was.

"When do you plan on starting a family?" Mamie asked as she passed around a plate of delicate little sandwiches. Lacey's teacup hit the saucer with a loud clink. Cam appeared undisturbed.

"Mother, we just got married." Lacey laughed. "Give us a little time."

"You don't always have the time you think, Lacey, honey. Look at your daddy and me. We'd planned to have a big ol' family, but he died before we

had more'n you. You listen to me, and don't put things off."

There could be no doubting Mamie's sincerity. Her eyes sparkled with tears and her voice shook. As usual when dealing with her mother, Lacey was torn between two opposing emotions: guilt and resentment.

Cam's hand closed over hers, squeezing gently. "We've got plenty of time to decide about children, Mamie. I think it's a mistake to rush into it. Besides, Lacey and I want some time to ourselves, don't we, honey?"

"Honey" nodded.

"Well, I can see your point, Cameron. But don't you go waitin' too long. I'm anxious to hold a grandbaby."

"I think you'll be a wonderful grandmother when the time comes, Mamie, though you look much too young."

Mamie flushed with pleasure. The compliment could have sounded glib, but Cam's tone made it impossible to doubt his sincerity. Lacey stared at her teacup. How did he manage it?

"I LIKED your mother," Cam said. The car slipped neatly into the stream of westbound traffic.

"You certainly know how to handle her." Lacey couldn't help the twinge of illogical resentment she felt.

"Are you sorry we got along?"

"Of course not." She sighed. "I'm glad you liked each other and that the visit went so well. Really I am."

"So what is it you're not glad about?" There was a hint of amusement in his tone, but no sarcasm.

Lacey felt like an idiot. "It's really stupid, but in thirty years I've never been able to handle my mother as neatly as you did. I guess I feel out-classed."

Cam grinned, but his glance held understanding. "The fact that I didn't have any problem with your mother has nothing to do with how you deal with her. You've got a lot of emotional history with her. That makes it harder. Besides, I think she was determined to get along with me. She wants to see you happy. She loves you."

"I know." Lacey scowled. "I love her, too."

Cam reached over to squeeze her knee. "Cheer up. Now that I've saved you from spinsterhood, she won't have to worry about you wasting away all by yourself. That should make her happy."

"Maybe. More than likely, she'll just turn her attention to something else. She's probably going to start worrying about us starting a family."

Cam smiled. "Do you want children, Lacey?"

The simple question seemed to catch at her throat, but her answer, when it came, was straight from the heart.

"Yes. Yes, I do want children."

"So do I."

Cam didn't say anything more. He didn't have to. Those few simple words had given Lacey more than enough to think about. Children made this marriage seem real. Children meant commitment.

Lying alone in her bed that night, Lacey stared up at the ceiling, trying to picture herself as a mother. The image was a little fuzzy. She'd never given children a lot of thought. Now it was hard to imagine herself with an infant.

Cam was another story. The picture of him as a father was sharp and clear. He'd be a good father. She didn't have any doubts about that. And how did she feel about the idea of having Cam's child?

She closed her eyes as a wave of heat washed over her. One hand pressed against her stomach as she tried to imagine what it would feel like to hold another life inside her. The idea of carrying Cam's child was disturbing, all the more so because it held a definite appeal. Especially when she thought about creating that child.

Her memory of their wedding night was hazy, but when she tried to conjure it up, she was left with an impression of pleasure. Somehow she knew that drunk or not, Cam had been a considerate lover. She only wished she could remember the pleasurable details....

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"ARE YOU SURE I shouldn't have worn something a little dressier?" Lacey smoothed the jade green skirt over her knees, her eyes going to Cam. He glanced away from the road long enough to inventory the simple cotton dress with the extravagantly full skirt and soft fitted top. She'd pulled her hair back in a chignon that made her look both elegant and casual.

He faced the windshield again, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. Did she have any idea how utterly desirable she looked?

"Cam?" She interpreted his silence as a negative. "It's not dressy enough, is it? Your sister is going to think I didn't care enough to dress up to meet her," she said.

"You look fine."

If the answer was a little abrupt, it reflected the way he felt. He'd never considered what a strain living with an attractive, desirable woman who just happened to be his wife and who he'd promised not to lay a hand on would be.

Lacey fussed with the neckline of the dress. "First impressions are important. I don't— What are you doing?"

With a mumbled curse, Cam switched on the right turn signal and began cutting across the lanes of traffic. He eased into the emergency lane and stopped.

"What's wrong?"

Cam unbuckled his seat belt and then leaned over to do the same to hers. There was a wicked gleam in his eyes that brought an unexpected flutter to her heart.

"Cam, there are laws."

"Against a man kissing his wife?"

"Against using the emergency lane for anything but an emergency," Lacey told him.

"This is an emergency." With that, his mouth took the last of her breath.

Tilting her head to allow the kiss to deepen, Lacey was aware of nothing but the warm pool of heat that seemed to spread outward from her mouth until her whole body was flushed.

It wasn't the first time he'd kissed her, nor the first time she'd felt this heat. But this time, the warmth seemed to spread a little farther, demand a little more.

His tongue edged along her mouth and she opened to him. His free hand slid upward from the curve of her waist until his palm rested against the side of her breast. She'd forgotten where they were, where they were going.

The raucous blast of a truck's horn broke the sweet spell. Cam's mouth lifted from hers slowly, and Lacey felt dazed as she looked up at him. Never in her life had any man made her tremble with just a kiss.

CLAIRE'S HOME was on a half acre of land in the Simi Valley. The car had barely come to a standstill in the gravel

drive when the front door of the house burst open, with shouts of "Uncle Cam! Uncle Cam!" near to deafening. He was laughing as he scooped up the two smallest children, settling one on each hip.

The screen door opened again, but closed more gently. The woman who approached them was lovely. Skin the color of pale coffee was stretched over sculpted cheekbones that made Lacey wish she'd spent more time with blusher and a contour brush. Though her dark eyes were watchful, the woman smiled at Lacey.

Cam fought his way free of the children. "Lacey, this is my sister Claire. Claire, this is Lacey, who was kind enough to marry me."

Lacey blinked, her eyes unconsciously widening a bit, but she smiled as she stretched out a hand to Claire.

"I take it Cam didn't tell you that we're all adopted."

"I— No, he didn't."

Claire's face softened as she looked at her brother. "I think he forgets most of the time. We grew up in a mixed bag of a family. It's easy to forget that other people may be shocked."

"I wasn't shocked," Lacey said. "It's just that— Well, you don't look much alike, do you?"

Claire laughed. "No, I guess we don't."

The house was larger than it looked from the outside, the rooms big and airy. The decor had a simple elegance that reminded Lacey of her hostess. But her attention was on the two men who sat near the fireplace. The taller of the two was Claire's husband, Joe, who came and shook Lacey's hand, giving her a wide smile.

"So, you're the lady who finally caught Cam. His mother will be delighted he's no longer on the loose."

Lacey heard Claire and the children come in and shut the door, but her attention had shifted over Joe's shoulder to the man now standing up.

"Hi, Lacey."

"Jimbo." She kept her tone neutral. It was the first time she'd seen him since that eventful night in Las Vegas, and she was enjoying watching him squirm.

"You look really nice."

Lacey's chin quivered. He was throwing himself on his knees, at least verbally. She ought to let him grovel, but Mamie'd taught her better. "Thank you."

Jimbo saw the humor in her eyes and grinned. "I knew you wouldn't be able to hold a grudge."

"I should." Lacey held out her hand, and Jimbo took it, pulling her into a hug.

The evening turned out to be a lot of fun. Claire's entertaining style was relaxed. She allowed her guests to amuse themselves rather than try to force the evening into any set pattern.

The children were everywhere. Lacey had sorted them into four small bodies, two boys and two girls ranging from ten years old down to three, but they still seemed to form a mini-horde. And they all seemed to think that Uncle Cam was one of the best entertainments life had to offer.

"He'll make a good father."

Jimbo's comment followed her own thoughts so closely that Lacey felt as if he must have read them. "Yes, he will." She reached for her glass of wine.

Claire was in the kitchen, taking care of some last-minute details. Joe and Cam were discussing furniture making. For all intents and purposes, she and Jimbo were alone.

"You know, I've known Cam a lot longer than you have."

"Almost anybody has," Lacey said.

"Has Cam told you much about his past?" Jimbo asked.

"No. I didn't even know he was adopted until today."

"He doesn't talk about it much, but if it hadn't been for his foster parents, he'd be behind bars right now, or dead."

Lacey choked on her wine. "Cam? Mr. Calm-and-steady?"

But Jimbo was serious. "I met Cam when I was working in a program to help gang members. He was only thirteen or so, but he was one tough kid. The police picked him up on a robbery charge, and I got the assignment to talk to him.

"I was only nine or ten years older than he was and he took one look at me and said I wasn't old enough to be telling him how to live."

Jimbo smiled. "But there was something in his eyes that made me think maybe it wasn't too late for him. I knew about Mary and David Martin. They'd taken in three or four troubled kids by then. God, Cam was hostile.

"His father was dead and his mother just left him one day and never came back. But Mary and David took him in and convinced him that not every adult was a rat. It took a while to track down his maternal grandparents and by then, he'd settled in so well with Mary and David that they left him there."

"I'd never have guessed," Lacey murmured.

"He'd never tell you, but I know that calm of his can be a little hard to take sometimes. I thought it might help if you understood where it came from."

"It does." She looked at Cam, trying to see that angry little boy in the man. He glanced up, caught her eye and smiled. Lacey smiled back, but she

was glad for the distraction Claire provided by announcing dinner. Jimbo had given her a lot to consider.

She was still considering it as they drove home a few hours later. She studied Cam surreptitiously, seeing an angry little boy who'd had no one but himself to depend on.

"You don't talk about yourself very much," she said at last.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his hands tighten on the wheel and then relax. "I wondered why Jimbo was talking to you so earnestly. Telling you about my misspent youth, was he?"

Lacey shrugged. "He told me a little. He thought it might help me to understand you."

"And does it?"

"I think so," Lacey said quietly.

"It isn't that simple. It takes a lot of time and effort to get to know a person. And you have to get to know them in the here and now. You've learned something about who I was. I'm not that screwed-up little boy anymore. I haven't been for a very long time."

"I didn't say you were," Lacey protested. "I just wanted you to know that I was sorry you'd had to go through that."

"I know." He reached out, taking her hand in his. "I don't talk about those days because I've moved on. And I don't want you looking at me and feeling sorry for what I was. I want you to see what I am."

"I do, but I can't help admire the way you've pulled yourself up." Lacey curled her fingers around his hard palm.

"I had a lot of help. Jimbo, for one, though I may murder him after this latest routine."

"I really think he was trying to help," Lacey offered.

"I think he was poking his nose in."

Cam didn't sound too upset, but they didn't talk much during the remainder of the drive.

By the time Cam pulled the car into the driveway, midnight hovered just around the corner. The neighborhood was still, the houses dark.

Lacey was vividly aware of Cam following her up the walkway to the door. As they stepped into the silent house, Derwent ran in from the kitchen. Lacey bent to scratch one ear, glad of the small distraction.

She wasn't quite sure why a distraction was desirable. This was just a night like any other she'd spent here. But there was something different in the air.

Derwent licked her hand and then headed back toward his bed in the kitchen. Lacey stood up, drawing in a deep breath. She cleared her throat. "Well, it's pretty late. I think I'll go to bed."

"Good idea," Cam said. Lacey glanced at him, wondering if his words had a hidden meaning.

"Well, good night." She took a step closer. Their good-night kiss was a well-established ritual. Why did tonight feel different?

Cam's hand came up, cupping her cheek as his head bent to hers. His mouth was warm, molding to hers in a way that was both demand and appeal. And she had to answer both. She'd been right in sensing that tonight was different.

Her mouth opened to his, inviting—no, demanding—his possession. His tongue slid inside, fencing with hers. His hand swept her closer still, until not even a shadow could have fit between them. Lacey rose on her toes, molding herself to him, as eager for the contact as he was.

This was what she'd been missing. All her life she'd been only half-

complete. Everything had been leading up to this moment, this place, this man.

Cam's fingers found the pins that held her hair, pulling them loose. The feel of her hair against his skin seemed to loosen his control another notch. He tilted her head, deepening the kiss still further as his other hand swept down her back, tracing the gentle hollows at the base of her spine before flattening over the swell of her buttocks and pressing her into the cradle of his hips.

Lacey could feel the pressure of his arousal through the layers of fabric that separated them. A warm, liquid weight seemed to settle in her stomach. She'd never wanted anything more than she wanted Cam in that moment.

"Lacey, tell me you want me as much as I want you."

The words were half demand, half plea and wholly irresistible. Her eyes opened slowly to stare up into his.

"Lacey?" He made her name a question.

Without willing them, her fingers lifted to touch his face, the sensitive line of his mouth, the strength of his jaw. Cam stood still under her light exploration. And the answer was simple.

"Yes." The one whispered word was all she could manage, but it was all he needed to hear.

His head lowered, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that sent shock waves all the way to Lacey's toes. Her zipper slid downward beneath his fingers, and his hand flattened against the warm skin of her back. All the need, all the hunger they had been denying, was suddenly freed.

Shirt buttons seemed to slip magically open, and her hands were pressed against the hard muscles of his chest. He eased her a fraction away and her dress fell to the floor. His mouth

caught her soft moan of pleasure as the softness of her breasts met the hard warmth of his chest.

Bending, he caught her behind the knees and swept her into his arms. For an instant, Lacey had the dizzying sensation that the world was spinning around her. She buried her face against his chest as he carried her into the bedroom.

Cam set her on the bed, following her down so that she was pressed into the pillows. She was surrounded by him, his warmth, his scent, his sheer masculinity. She'd never felt more protected, yet more threatened. She wanted him, but the very intensity of her desire frightened her.

She slid her fingers into the silky hair at the back of his head, drawing him closer, wanting to lose herself in him. For now she wanted to think only of how good it felt to be in his arms. This was right. This was meant to be.

LACEY WOKE slowly, aware of feeling warm and content. She snuggled deeper into the pillow. There was something special about this morning. Her mouth curved in a soft smile and she lay in sleepy contentment, not really trying to remember what made this day special. It was enough to savor the feeling.

There was a movement behind her, and a long, definitely masculine arm fell across the curve of her waist. Cam. How could she have forgotten, even for a moment, just why today was different? They'd made love last night. More than once, as a matter of fact.

Memories of the night just past slipped into her mind. Cam's hands, so sure and knowing on her body. His mouth finding erogenous zones she hadn't known existed.

But he hadn't been the only one to take an active part in their lovemaking. Her cheeks warmed as she remembered that she'd made more than a few explorations of her own. Her fingers tingled with the memory.

She'd learned more about her own potential for passion last night than she had in all the years that had gone before. Cam was a wonderful lover, strong and considerate, not afraid to take the lead, yet confident enough to lie back and allow her to direct their path. Lacey had taken advantage of that confidence. She'd been shameless last night. And she'd enjoyed every minute of it.

But that had been last night. This morning, the sunlight seemed to cast a slightly different light on things. Their marriage was no longer just writing on a piece of paper. It was real. And now that it was too late, she wasn't sure she was ready for that reality.

She eased the covers back and then lifted Cam's arm, so that she could slip out from beneath it. The floor was cool beneath her bare feet, in contrast to the heat that seemed to cover her from head to toe. For a moment, the urge to crawl back into bed beside Cam was strong. She wavered. But she had a shop to open. Besides, she felt too vulnerable right now. She needed a little time to gather herself before she faced him again.

THEIR MARRIAGE shifted into a new phase. Lacey no longer slept alone in the guest room. No matter what the stresses of the day had been, they were put aside once the bedroom door shut behind them. But it sometimes seemed that was the only place they'd made any progress. Their attempts to spend more time together met with mixed success.

Lacey's visit to his workshop might have worked out better if she hadn't shown up just as Cam misjudged the pressure necessary to shape a thin piece of facing to a curved shelf. The facing snapped with a pop that paled in comparison to the curse that followed it.

"Hello?"

Cam spun around at the sound of Lacey's greeting.

"Is this a bad time?"

Cam took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax. "No. It's not a bad time. Aren't you home early?" He set the ruined facing down as Lacey lifted her face to his. Cam felt some of the day's frustrations slide away as her mouth softened under his.

"It sounded like you were having some problems," she said as they drew apart.

Cam shrugged. "It hasn't been the greatest day. What are you doing home? Nothing wrong at the shop, is there?"

"No. I've got some things I wanted to do around here, so I'm letting Margaret close the shop tonight."

"Things? What kind of things?"

"Nothing major. Just come cleaning."

"I thought the place couldn't get much cleaner. Don't you think you're working a little too hard?"

"I enjoy it. Is this where you do all your work?"

Cam was willing to let the subject of housework drop for the moment. "It's not huge, but I know where everything is." Cam eyed her warily. She'd already reorganized the house, but his shop was in exactly the right state of chaotic order.

Lacey caught his eye and laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not going to try and straighten it out."

"Good." Cam threw his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. He

never tired of the feel of her against him.

"So what do you do with all these tools?" Lacey asked.

Cam picked up a piece of wood, his long fingers caressing the grain. "My grandfather taught me most of what I know. I didn't meet him until I was almost fifteen."

"Is that why you decided to go into carpentry, because that's what your grandfather did?"

"Not really. But the minute he handed me a piece of wood, I felt as if I'd found something I'd been missing for a long time. I never wanted to do anything else from that moment on."

There was a long moment when there didn't seem to be anything more to say. Cam broke the somber mood.

"Enough of all this. You're looking much too beautiful to be spending your time here. Let's go out to dinner."

"But I had things to do," Lacey insisted.

"The house will still be dirty when we get back." Cam dismissed her arguments with a wave of his hand.

"YOU KNOW WHAT your problem is, Lacey McCleary?" Cam asked her later that evening as they sat together on the sofa.

"What?" She had to clear her throat to get it out.

"You think too much." His teeth nibbled at one earlobe, and Lacey felt her toes curl.

"Do I?" she asked breathlessly.

"You do." His tongue traced a pattern around the curve of her ear and her fingers dug into his shoulders.

"I'll have to try to do less of it."

Cam braced himself on his elbow, his hand seeking out the tiny gold buttons that ran down the front of her dress.

"Do less of what?"

"Thinking," she whispered, her breath catching as his hand slipped inside to find the softness of her breast.

"Too much thinking can be dangerous," he breathed.

But it wasn't thinking that was dangerous. It was feeling. Feeling something so strongly that it threatened to wash away everything else.

His fingers whispered over her skin and she closed her eyes, her skin flushing a delicate rose as he spread the dress open so that she lay nearly bare beneath him.

They'd been lovers for weeks now. Certainly he'd seen even more of her than this. But always in the safe darkness of their bedroom. There was something so decadent about this. Lying on the sofa with all the lamps lit. Decadent and exciting.

Cam's mouth found the nipple of one breast and she arched upward, feeling the gentle tugging sensation deep inside, a warm pool of need spreading outward from the pit of her stomach.

Forcing her hands between them, she struggled with the buttons on his shirt. They resisted stubbornly, but at last gave way, so that she could bury her fingers in the crisp dark hair that covered his chest. His head left her breast, but only to return to her mouth.

Strong fingers slid into her hair, tilting her face upward as his chest settled over hers. Lacey moaned against his mouth as the firm muscles pressed against her. Passion had become a demanding, urgent presence.

Cam's knee thrust between hers, pressing upward against the heart of her need. Lacey's fingers flexed against his shoulder, as she arched into his

knee, wordlessly pleading for more. Cam dragged his mouth away from hers and stared into her eyes for a moment before pulling himself up and away. She started a protest that ended on a pleased murmur when she saw that he was standing up to strip away the rest of his clothes. She watched him, her eyes half-lidded, her expression vaguely feline. He jerked his shirt off and reached for his belt buckle, his hands freezing as she reached up to cup him through the fabric of his slacks.

Never in all her life had she done anything so blatantly sexual. But then, no one else had ever made her feel the way Cam did.

He groaned as her fingers gently caressed him.

"Lacey, you're driving me crazy."

"You told me I thought too much, so now I'm only feeling."

"I think I'm the one who's feeling." His voice held a strained note that pleased her enormously. He stepped back and Lacey's hand dropped away. Her mouth pursed in a moue, only to soften into a pleased smile when Cam all but ripped off the rest of his clothes.

She opened to him, cradling him between her knees, her body arching to that first slow thrust. For a moment, the fire was banked, but only for a moment.

There was an urgency in her tonight that she didn't understand. A powerful, consuming need. When Cam started to move, she responded hungrily. Each movement sent ripples of pleasure through her until she was drowning in sensation.

Cam's mouth found hers, his tongue thrusting inside to tangle with hers, swallowing her soft whispers. Lacey felt as if she couldn't possibly get enough of him. She wanted this feeling to go on forever, and yet the plea-

sure was so intense that it had to end soon.

The pleasure built higher until she was aware of nothing but Cam and the intense ecstasy of their joining. And then the pleasure crested, washing over her, sending her tumbling into pure sensation. From somewhere a long way away, she heard Cam's muffled groan of completion.

It was a long time before either of them moved or spoke. Cam shifted at last, lifting his weight from her. Lacey clutched at his shoulders.

"Sweetheart, this couch ain't big enough for the two of us."

"I don't mind," she mumbled.

"Well, I do. I want you somewhere where I can hold you properly." He bent to scoop her off the sofa, carrying her out of the living room and toward their bedroom.

He set her on the bed and followed her down, sweeping her against him, holding her close.

Lacey had the feeling there was something to be learned in the way Cam touched her, held her. Some message that was important, if only she knew how to interpret it.

But the meaning stayed just out of her grasp.

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THE TELEVISION was not turned up particularly loud, but the sound of it grated on Lacey's nerves. Cam was sprawled in front of the glowing box, his long legs stretched across the floor she'd mopped just yesterday.

Not that he seemed to care about the floor. She stabbed the needle through the button and into her finger. That only added to her annoyance.

"Yeah!"

She jumped at Cam's loud exclamation, as cheers issued from the

speaker. A home run or an out. She stifled the urge to ask. She'd enjoyed baseball a time or two herself, but she wasn't in the mood for it right now.

She jabbed at the button again, securing it to the fabric. The faded chambray made her frown. It was a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon and she was sitting here mending. It seemed as if Cam lost buttons every time he wore a shirt.

And if she wasn't mending *his* shirts, she was cleaning *his* house or cooking *his* meals. All this while trying to run a profitable business. It wasn't that she minded. It was part of being married. But she did mind the fact that Cam didn't seem to appreciate all her work.

Oh, he'd comment on the fact that the house looked nice, or say that he'd enjoyed a meal. He'd even suggested on a few occasions that she was working too hard. But he didn't *really* appreciate the amount of work she was doing.

It was Cam's mistake that he chose that particular moment to speak to her.

"Why don't you come over here and watch the game?"

"There's nowhere to sit." She didn't lift her head.

"You could sit on my lap. Or we could move the television and both sit on the couch. Come on, Lacey. You haven't stopped working since you got up this morning."

"Well, pardon me for trying to get something done," she snapped and stood up, injury in every line of her body.

"What on earth?" Cam's eyes widened as she turned to stalk out of the room. He stood up and caught her arm. "What's wrong?"

Lacey stared at his chest. "Nothing's wrong."

"Does it bother you that I'm watching the baseball game? I asked if

you wanted to go for a drive, but you said you had things to do around the house."

"Of course it doesn't bother me," she said woodenly.

"Look, why don't we go for a drive? It's a beautiful day. We could head for the coast and drive up 101."

"I can't. I have too much to do here."

Cam's fingers tightened on her arm a moment before dropping away. "Forget about whatever you've got in mind. Let's get out of here. You work too hard."

It was as if he'd lit a match to a Roman candle. Did he think she liked slaving?

"Well, if I don't do it, it's not going to get done, now is it? You obviously have more important things to do." She gestured contemptuously at the television as Cam snapped the set off.

"Don't let me interrupt you," she went on. "This is undoubtedly an important game. Heaven forbid you should miss it." *My God, I sound like a harpy.* But she couldn't seem to stop the flow of rage.

Cam stepped back, folding his arms over his chest. "You want to tell me what the hell this is all about? You've been acting like Joan of Arc on her way to the stake for days now. I thought it was a passing mood, but obviously it goes deeper."

"Joan of Arc?" She stared at him. "Are you implying that I've been acting like a martyr?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Why you...you...male chauvinist pig!" The insult didn't nearly express her feelings, but it was the best she could do. He didn't seem in the least disturbed, which only made her

"It doesn't matter what I do around here—you never notice. I've developed housewife's knees. I've ruined my fingernails. I've cooked and cleaned and mended your damned clothes until I feel like a slave, and you sit in front of that damned television watching a stupid baseball game. And then you act like you can't imagine why I'm upset. You—"

"Who asked you to?" The calm question broke into the middle of her tirade.

"I— You—" she stammered, her train of thought broken.

"Oh, no. Don't try to pin this on me. *You're* the one who's been running around here like the pope was going to come to visit any minute."

This conversation wasn't going at all the way she'd imagined. He was supposed to be apologetic. "But I—"

"But nothing. Have I once said to you, 'Lacey, why don't you wear the grain off the floors with a scrub brush?' Or 'Lacey, why don't you cook like Julia Child every night?' Or 'Lacey, why don't you mend my damned shirts?'"

He jerked the shirt out of her hands, throwing it into a corner of the room. The violence in the small act told her that his emotions were every bit as riled as hers.

"You didn't ask maybe, but it was obvious that—"

"No, it wasn't," he interrupted flatly. "The only thing that's obvious is that you have a Donna Reed complex. I never implied that I expected you to take on the sole responsibility for running this place."

"Well, if I don't do it, who will?" There. She had him.

"Lacey, I lived alone for quite a few years. I didn't starve to death, the house didn't vanish in a mound of filth, and my shirts all had buttons.

I'm perfectly capable of taking care of things myself. At the very least, we could share the work."

"Well, then why have you let me do everything myself?"

"When have you given me a chance to do anything? Every time I suggested it, you told me you'd rather do it yourself. When I tried to do laundry, you acted like I was incapable of pushing the right buttons. You pick my damned socks up almost before I get them off. Just what do you suggest I do? Fight you for the privilege of mopping the floor?"

She stared at him. Had she really been like that?

"I guess maybe I have been a little compulsive," she murmured. "I just wanted everything to be perfect."

"Lacey, this is real life. Who needs a perfectly clean house or gourmet meals every night, if it cuts into time that could be better spent on other things?"

"My mother always kept the house immaculate and we always had beautiful meals. I just wanted to do the same."

"Lacey, honey, think about it. Your mother didn't work full-time. She may have done volunteer work and managed your father's investments, but she didn't run a business. Besides, from what you've told me, Mamie has always had a maid. Did it ever occur to you that the maid had a lot to do with cleaning the house and putting those beautiful meals on the table?"

Lacey shook her head slowly. It was stupid, but she'd never thought of that. "Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right." He reached out, drawing her close. "Haven't you figured out yet that I'm always right?"

Lacey managed a smile. "Hardly."

"Close enough." His hand circled the back of her neck, warm and strong.

"Between the *two* of us, I don't see any reason why we can't keep the place in reasonably good shape."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you about the game."

"No big deal. You can make it up to me by sitting down and watching the rest of it."

"I really should—" He cut off her protest with a quick, thorough kiss.

"You really should sit down and relax." She let him draw her forward to join him on the sofa.

LACEY'S HANDS paused in folding a pile of batiste camisoles, and she stared at the mirror without seeing anything it reflected. Usually, the image of the quiet elegance of the shop was enough to draw at least a smile. But not today.

Today, nothing seemed able to lift her spirits. She'd been feeling restless and moody for days now and had awakened in a gloomy mood this morning. Cam was already up and had prepared breakfast for her. As she'd poked at her scrambled eggs and bacon, she'd wondered if there was anything the man couldn't do. What did he need a wife for, anyway? She was beginning to wonder if the reason she hadn't married before she was thirty was that she wasn't really suited to the institution.

And now, here she was wondering the same thing.

"Boy, you look about as cheerful as I feel."

Lacey started, turning toward the voice. "Lisa! What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might like to go out for lunch. It's been a while since we got together. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, of course not." Lacey noticed how Lisa's eyes had dark circles under

them. "Margaret can take care of the shop for me."

They walked to a restaurant a couple of blocks away. Lacey waited until they were seated and their orders given before asking Lisa, "What's wrong?"

"It's that obvious, is it?"

"It's obvious to me. But I've known you a long time."

"Yeah. Since before I met Frank." Lisa moved her water glass in small circles. "He moved out last week and we're filing for divorce."

Lacey felt the world spin around her for a moment. "Divorce," she whispered. "Lisa, you can't be getting a divorce. You and Frank love each other. Everybody knows that."

"Well, everybody forgot to tell Frank that." Lisa laughed, a bitter sound that carried pain.

"You want to tell me what happened?" Lacey asked.

"I'm not sure I know what happened." Lisa poked at her salad. "Frank said we didn't seem to need each other very much anymore. He said I seemed to be doing just fine without him." Lisa put her fork down. "Remember I told you that he asked me to cut down on my hours a few months ago? That he wanted to start a family?" At Lacey's nod she went on, "I promised him then that we'd talk about it again when I finished the project I was working on."

"And did you?" Lacey asked quietly.

"No. By the time that project was through, there was another in the works."

"Can't you explain that you didn't mean you wanted to wait forever?"

"Oh, Lacey, I don't think he wants to listen anymore." Lisa's voice broke on a sob. "He looked at me like I was someone he'd known long ago. I *tried* to talk to him. I practically begged him

to talk. But he said it was too late and there was no sense in staying together.

"But I still need him. Knowing that Frank was there was what kept me going. I don't know how I'll manage without him. Don't ever fall in love, not even with Cam. It hurts too damned much when you lose them. Just too damned much."

She stopped talking as she fought back tears. Lacey stared at the table. This couldn't be true. Not Lisa and Frank. They were so perfect for each other. They'd been so much in love. If their marriage couldn't survive, how could anyone's? Especially one begun on shaky foundations.

Like her own.

By late afternoon, Lacey had managed to put thoughts of Lisa's marriage and her own on a back burner. But they simmered there, threatening to boil over by the time she pulled into the driveway at home. Cam's home, she reminded herself. His truck was gone, and she remembered that he was supposed to deliver a desk to someone in Santa Monica. That meant she was alone.

With Cam gone, she'd have time to think. But that might not be so good. There was an almost inaudible voice in her head that suggested maybe she was overreacting to Lisa's news, that one failed marriage didn't necessarily spell doom for her own.

Part of her wanted Cam to come home and make her believe that everything was going to work out. It was his calm confidence that had taken their marriage this far.

But it couldn't work.

She hurried through the house, giving Derwent an absent pat. She was aware of him watching her, his head cocked to one side as if puzzled. It had become a small ritual that she played

with him when she came home, but she wasn't in the mood tonight.

She suddenly knew what she had to do: end this travesty of a marriage before it was too late. She was grateful that they hadn't fallen in love. If Lisa was right, love would have only brought more pain.

Lacey's hands were shaking as she reached for her clothes. The sight of Cam's shirts hanging next to her dresses almost destroyed her resolve. But no. This was the right thing to do. She was sure of it. Talking to Lisa today had been the final little push.

She'd been having doubts for weeks now. Had there ever been a time when she didn't? She should have recognized her mood swings as a clear sign that it was time to end this whole foolish experiment.

She packed quickly, wanting to be gone before Cam got home. It was cowardly, but she didn't want to face him.

But luck wasn't with her. She'd just finished putting the last of her toiletries in a small tote when the bedroom door swung open. Lacey froze, the very picture of guilt. Cam's eyes went from her pale face to the full suitcase.

"What's going on?"

Lacey stared at him, then at a point somewhere to his left. "I'm leaving." The bare words were all she could find.

"Leaving?" He was apparently trying to absorb the meaning of her words. "Why?" The simple question was the one she'd been dreading.

"I saw Lisa today."

"Great. What does Lisa have to do with this?"

"She and Frank have separated. They're talking about a divorce."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I don't see what it has to do with you moving out."

"Don't you see what it means? They married before Lisa was out of college and I've never seen a couple more in love. Really in love."

"Well, that's great but—"

"Cam, if Frank and Lisa can't make it when they had everything going for them, how can we expect to do any better?"

She looked at him, pleading with him to understand. But his eyes had turned a stormy blue.

"Do you mean to tell me you're leaving me because Frank and Lisa couldn't hold their marriage together?"

"No. Because of what their breakup represents."

"It represents that they had problems they couldn't work out. It has nothing to do with us."

"Yes, it does. Cam, they really loved each other, and that wasn't enough. We don't even have that much. All we've got is a wedding neither of us remembers, a piece of paper we don't remember signing and a crazy idea that we could make something out of nothing. Well, we can't, and I'm leaving before we end up hurting each other."

She snapped the suitcase shut, but before she could pick it up, Cam's hand slammed down, pinning it to the bed. She looked up into eyes that burned with anger.

"That is the stupidest argument I've ever heard. I could just as well argue that, since Lisa and Frank started out with love on their side, their separation shows that's the wrong way to go about marriage."

Lacey closed her ears to his logic. He could make anything seem reasonable.

"I'm doing what I think is best."

"You're doing what you think is safest. You're a coward, Lacey. You're

afraid you might be hurt, so you're running away. Let's call it like it is."

"You can think what you like."

"You want to know what I think? I think you're a quitter. Oh, you'll take chances on your business, but that's safe enough. What would you lose? Money can be replaced. But you're not going to risk your emotions. You've been fighting them ever since Las Vegas."

"You're falling in love with me, but that scares the hell out of you. So you're going to run away. Well, you go ahead, Lacey. Because I'm through fighting to make you see what we could have. Lock yourself in your safe little world. I hope you'll be happy there. Alone."

He turned on his heel and strode out. A moment later Lacey heard the front door slam and then the roar of the truck's engine. She'd never seen Cam so angry. Angry and hurt.

Still, this was the right thing to do. Wasn't it?

IT WAS AFTER dark when Lacey pulled into the driveway of the house she'd grown up in. She was going to ask if she could spend the night here. Tomorrow, she'd go and open up her apartment. But tonight she didn't feel like dealing with that.

There was the quick tap of heels on the tiled floor and then Mamie was opening the door.

"Why, sugar, what are you doin' here? Where's Cameron?"

"Mother." Lacey's voice quivered on the word, and her eyes stung with tears.

"Lacey, honey, what's wrong?" Mamie caught her hand and pulled her inside. The door shut behind them.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Despite her struggle to sound calm, her voice broke abruptly.

"You know you can always stay here, honey. You're pale, sugar. Come on in the livin' room and I'll get you a dash of bourbon. Put a little color in those cheeks."

Lacey let Mamie seat her on the sofa. She didn't want to tell her mother what was wrong. She just wanted to find a dark corner to crawl into.

"I—I've left Cam."

"Oh, Lacey, honey, why?" Mamie was shocked.

"Because it wasn't a real marriage." The top of her head felt light, as if it might float off at any moment. She stared at the bottom of the shot glass, and it occurred to her that she hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. "It started off all wrong." And Lacey told her mother the true story from beginning to end.

Her voice dissolved into tears as she told her mother about Cam's reaction, and Mamie reached for her, pulling her close. With a sob, Lacey turned, burying her face in her mother's shoulder. The simple comfort still had the power to make the world seem a little less bleak.

She cried until she didn't have the breath to cry anymore. Mamie held her, murmuring softly.

"We're not going to talk about this anymore tonight. You're tucked out and you're goin' straight to bed."

"I can't sleep."

"Yes, you can," Mamie told her. "You're goin' to sleep till mornin' and then we'll talk about this. Now I want you to go take a nice warm shower while I get your room ready."

LACEY'S EMOTIONS were so raw a week later that she began to wonder if she

wasn't coming down with one of the throat infections that had plagued her childhood. She made an appointment with her doctor; in the meantime, she tried to stave it off with vitamins.

She didn't hear a word from Cam, and she told herself that was exactly the way she wanted it. Which didn't explain why she lunged for the phone every time it rang. Why each ring of the brass bell on the shop door brought her head around.

It was late morning when the shop bell announced the arrival of Mamie.

"Mother. You didn't tell me you'd be in town." She glanced at her watch. "Did you want to go for lunch?"

To her surprise, Mamie flushed a delicate pink.

"Well, actually, I already have plans for lunch. I just came in to see if you had a scarf to go with this suit."

Lacey looked at the classic silk suit that fit her mother's trim figure perfectly. The delicate ivory was set off by a warm coral blouse.

"I think I've got something that might look good." She led the way to a table across the shop. "Just who is this lunch date? Anyone I know?"

Mamie looked away. "Well, as a matter of fact—"

The shop bell rang again and Lacey looked up to see Jimbo, his stocky form encased in a neat blue suit, complete with tie. His eyes settled on Mamie and lit up as if he'd just been given a glimpse of the Holy Grail. Lacey looked from him to her mother, surprising a look that mixed shy pleasure and coquetry.

She looked at her mother incredulously. "Jimbo?"

Mamie's look held a touch of defiance. "He's a very nice man."

"Well, sure, but—" She didn't get a chance to finish. Jimbo stopped in

front of them, reaching out to clasp Mamie's hand.

"Mamie. You look exquisite as always."

"Why, thank you, James. You look very handsome in that suit."

To Lacey's amusement, Jimbo blushed.

"Hello, Jimbo." She had the strong feeling that if she didn't remind them of her presence, they might forget she was there altogether. His expression cooled.

"Hello, Lacey. I hope you know you're a fool."

"Well, I guess I know it now. It's nice to see you, too." She didn't have to be psychic to know the reason for his statement was Cam. Maybe Jimbo would take a hint and let it go at that. But subtlety had never been his strong suit.

"You realize how dumb this whole thing is. Cam's miserable. You're miserable."

"Did Cam tell you that?"

"Hell, no. All he said was that you'd left. He also told me to mind my own business."

"You don't seem inclined to take his advice," Lacey said.

"I don't see any sense in minding my own business when two of my best friends are miserable."

"James, I'm not sure we should try and interfere in this. After all, Cameron and Lacey are adults."

"I'm sorry, Mamie, but I can't just stand here and watch them make the biggest mistake of their lives. Anyone can see they're head over heels in love with each other."

"Aren't you going to be late for lunch or something?" Lacey chose to ignore his words. As she watched them leave, there was still something incongruous about the pairing. Still, she

couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother look so happy.

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LACEY MANAGED to put off thinking about Jimbo's words for several hours. But now, seated in the doctor's waiting room, she found herself thumbing through a magazine and seeing nothing in it.

Head over heels in love with each other. Impossible. She'd know if she was in love with Cam, even if she didn't know his feelings. Surely, you couldn't be in love and not know it. No, she wasn't in love with him. But she did miss him.

A week ago, it had all seemed so clear. Now her reasoning seemed a little foggy. Why had she panicked because Lisa and Frank were splitting up?

But before she could come up with an answer to that question, the nurse called her into the inner office.

"WELL, YOU WERE certainly right about your throat." Dr. Riteman studied her. "It's been quite a while since you had one of these infections, hasn't it?"

"A few years," Lacey answered.

"Well, you've got a pretty good one now." He studied her folder. "I see you recently got married. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Lacey murmured.

He made some notes on the chart. "A round of antibiotics should take care of that throat. Is there any chance you're pregnant?"

"No, I—" She stopped, feeling a sudden tightness in her throat that had nothing to do with infected tonsils.

Shrewd blue eyes regarded her. "Are you sure, Lacey? If there's any doubt, we don't want to endanger the baby."

When was your last menstrual period?"

"I don't know." She tried to think. "I'm late, I guess. But I've been under a lot of stress."

"Do you have any other symptoms? Nausea, dizziness, lack of appetite, tiredness?"

"I— All of those."

Her voice was shaking, and Dr. Riteman reached out to put his hands over hers. His eyes were kind. "I'll tell you what. Why don't we take a urine sample and check. Just to make sure."

TWO HOURS later she walked out of the office with a handful of booklets that confirmed the reality. Just the early stages, but it was never too soon to start taking care of herself, the doctor had told her.

She was carrying Cam's child. The thought brought a confusing rush of emotions tumbling after it. She'd always planned to have children. In the back of her mind, there'd always been the image of one or two small people who were a part of her. The father had been a vague figure, there, but not very real.

Until Cam. Lacey drew in a quick breath as a wave of longing swept over her, bringing tears to her eyes. She wanted nothing as much as to go and tell him her news. She wanted to feel his arms around her, hear him say that he was happy, that everything was going to be all right.

But she couldn't do that. She'd shut that door; slammed it, in fact. And she didn't want him to take her back because of the baby, but because he loved her and didn't want to live without her, anymore than she wanted to live without him. The realization took her breath away.

She was in love with Cameron McCleary.

Mamie was in the living room when Lacey came in. She looked up from a handful of knitting and smiled.

"You're home a bit early, sugar. There's some tea, if you'd like. Janey fixed it before she left for the day. Those cookies are absolutely divine. That girl has the lightest touch with anything baked."

Lacey sat down, pouring a cup of tea and reaching for a cookie. She was suddenly ravenous.

"How was your lunch with Jimbo?" Lacey hadn't decided whether she wanted to tell Mamie her own news.

"James and I had a lovely meal. He's a charmin' man and knows how to treat a lady."

"Well, if you're happy, then I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Lacey. That means a lot to me. Now, all we need to do is work on your bein' happy."

Lacey munched another cookie. "Mother?"

"Yes, sugar?"

Lacey took a sip of her tea. "How do you feel about being a grandmother?"

Mamie shrugged, without looking up from her knitting. "I won't mind when the time comes. It would be nice to have a little one around the place. But at the rate you're going, it's likely to be quite some time."

Lacey smiled. "Mama? I'm going to have a baby."

The knitting needles came to a halt, but Mamie didn't look up. The silence stretched.

"Do you mind?"

"Mind? Have you taken leave of your senses, child?" She leaned forward, and Lacey took the hands she held out. "A baby. Do you know how

long I've waited to see you rockin' my grandchild?"

Lacey laughed, her eyes sparkling with bright tears.

Mamie's face sobered. "You are goin' to tell Cameron."

"I don't know yet."

Mamie's fingers tightened on Lacey's. "You listen to me, Lacey. Cameron has a right to know he's goin' to be a daddy. You got no right keepin' it from him."

"I know, I know." She tugged her hands away, twisting them together in her lap. "I'll have to tell him, but I need a little time to adjust to the idea."

GOING INTO the shop the next day, Lacey found her concentration at an all-time low. If she wasn't thinking about the baby, she was thinking about its father, wondering how she would break the news to him.

Cam was so much on her mind that it was hardly a surprise when the bell pinged and she looked up to see his tall figure step through the door.

"Hello, Lacey." Cam spoke as he came near, his voice soft, though they were alone in the shop.

"Hello, Cam." She started to hold out her hand and then stopped. Shaking hands seemed a little absurd.

"You look beautiful." His eyes didn't miss anything, from the top of her neatly pinned chignon, over her pale green silk dress to the toes of her neat pumps.

"Thank you. How have you been? Are you keeping busy?"

"Busy enough. I finished the desk."

"The one with all the inlays? It looked gorgeous while you were working on it."

"I'm happy with it. And so were the Masdens. They've asked me to make a matching secretary."

"Are you going to do it?" she asked.

"I think so. But I've got other things in line ahead of them. It depends on whether they want to wait."

"They obviously appreciate the best. They'll wait."

Cam smiled, the first truly relaxed expression she'd seen. "I should hire you to run a PR department for me."

"Well, it's true."

His smile faded, replaced by a searching expression. "Derwent misses you. He sulked for two full days. He even refused to eat."

"Poor baby." Had Cam missed her, too? *Tell me you missed me. Ask me to come home.*

But when he spoke, it was on a different subject. "I hope you don't mind my dropping by like this."

"No, of course not." If only he knew how much she'd missed him, how hungry she'd been for the sight of him.

"I'd hate to think that we couldn't still be friends."

"I would, too." Friends? She also wanted to be his wife, his lover, the center of his life.

He stuck his hands into his pockets. "Well, I'd better get going. I need to pick up some things."

Tell him, you nitwit. Tell him how much you miss him, how much you want to come back to him.

She bit her lip against the urge to beg him to take her home with him. She murmured a goodbye and watched him leave, the bell jingling merrily behind him. Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides.

Well, Lacey, you certainly managed to make a royal mess of things this time.

WELL, I CERTAINLY blew that one.
Cam stalked along the sidewalk to his

truck. He hadn't said anything he'd wanted to say. He'd probably looked like a total fool, standing there gawking at her.

He'd given her some time. So okay, it was less than two weeks, but the house felt so damned empty without her. He'd come here, half thinking that he'd ask her to reconsider, give their marriage another try.

Why didn't you tell her how you felt?

How could he tell Lacey that his life was empty without her, that he was in love with her, when it was obvious that she didn't feel anything of the kind for him? Yet it hurt too much to think an end to their relationship was possible.

"No, dammit!" They felt too right together, too perfect. Lacey would feel it, too. She *had* to. Anything else was unthinkable. All he needed to do was give her some time.

Just a little time.

"JAMES is coming to dinner, sugar. I hope you don't mind." Even if Lacey had been inclined to object, she wouldn't have said anything to take the excitement from her mother's eyes.

The dinner proved to be more pleasant than she might have expected, considering her last encounter with Jimbo. Cam's name didn't come up until dessert was served.

"Have you seen Cam lately, Lacey?" Mamie asked.

"As a matter of fact, he stopped by the shop yesterday."

"Lacey, you didn't tell me you'd seen Cameron. Did you tell him—" Mamie broke off abruptly.

"Tell him what?" Jimbo looked from one to the other.

"Nothing," Lacey said.

"It doesn't sound like nothing." He lifted a bite of apple pie to his mouth.

"It's certainly not nothing," Mamie said. She caught her daughter's eye and lifted her chin. "I think James should know. He's practically family, after all."

Lacey threw her hands up.

"So tell me. My imagination's running wild."

"Lacey's goin' to have a baby."

Jimbo inhaled a mouthful of hot coffee and then choked. "You're what?" He squeezed the words out.

"I'm pregnant."

"Oh, my God."

Lacey raised her brows. She wasn't sure what response she'd expected, but this certainly wasn't it. He looked as if she'd said the world was coming to an end.

"James, what's the matter?"

He gave Mamie a distracted look. "Nothing. I was just surprised." He looked at his watch. "Good grief. Look how late it is. I'd forgotten I had an appointment."

"At nine o'clock?" Mamie asked incredulously.

"An eccentric client," he smiled.

"Sorry I've got to eat and run. The meal was wonderful."

"Jimbo—"

But Lacey was speaking to thin air. He'd already vanished from the dining room, and a minute later the front door closed behind him.

Mamie looked as confused as Lacey. "He seemed upset, didn't he?"

"He seemed demented."

SUMMER HAD truly arrived. The temperatures were creeping into the eighties. It was a beautiful day.

Cam was not in the mood to notice it. He was sitting at his workbench, but his hands weren't moving. Derwent sat next to the open garage door, apparently on guard.

The first few days after Lacey left, sheer rage had sustained Cam. He'd been so angry that he hadn't noticed the hurt. But the anger had trickled away, leaving a void.

He should have told her weeks ago that he loved her. He'd accused her of being a coward, but he was no better. When this trial marriage had become very real—at least for him—he should have said something.

And now she was gone. But not for good. He was going to figure out some way to convince her that this marriage was the best thing that had ever happened to either of them.

Derwent growled low in his throat, distracting Cam. He glanced up, not surprised to see Jimbo.

"Kill, Derwent," he ordered without much force. Derwent just grumbled as Jimbo sidled into the shop.

"I don't know why he doesn't like me," he said.

"Well, they do say that an animal's instinct is often far superior to a human's. Have a seat." Cam turned and leaned back against the bench.

Once settled, Jimbo didn't say anything. He sat staring at the concrete floor.

"You look like the Grinch just stole your Christmas. What's wrong?"

"I want to remind you, Cam, that we have many years of friendship behind us."

"That's true. Did you run into my car?"

"No." Jimbo sighed. "I saw Lacey last night."

Cam sat up straight. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine. Really, she's just fine."

Cam relaxed slowly. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry. I uhh—I probably shouldn't be saying anything at all, but under the circumstances—I sort of thought I

ought to tell you. Even though Lacey will probably never forgive me."

"Jimbo—" Cam took a step toward the other man.

"Lacey's pregnant," Jimbo blurted.

Cam stared at him. "My God."

"Funny, that was my reaction," Jimbo said.

"Why hasn't she told me? What the hell is going on in her head?" Derwent, sensing Cam's mood, jumped to his feet and barked sharply, eyeing Jimbo as the most likely source of the disturbance.

"I'm going to find her and get her to listen to reason, even if I have to kidnap her to do it." Cam strode out of the garage, punching the automatic button as he went. Jimbo ducked under the closing door.

"Cam, I really think we should talk before you go anywhere."

But Cam wasn't listening. He strode into the house, grabbed his keys, and reached for the front door.

"Cam, I really think we need to talk," Jimbo managed.

"Later. Shut the door, would you?" Jimbo pulled the door shut, hurried down the steps and trotted across the lawn.

Cam turned at the door of the car, and said to Jimbo, "You know, this may be just what we need to straighten things out between us. There's more than just the two of us to consider now. Maybe I can convince Lacey to give our marriage another try."

"No, you can't."

"What?" He finally had Cam's full attention.

"You can't convince Lacey to give your marriage another try."

"Why not?"

"Look, Cam, I did it for the best possible reasons. I really thought you two belonged together and it seemed like a good idea at the time." Jimbo

took a step back, his eyes on Cam's looming figure.

"Jimbo—" Cam's tone held a warning.

"Well, you remember the night of Lacey's birthday?"

"Jimbo, I just want to know what you did."

"Well, actually, it's not what I did. It's more what you didn't do."

Cam stared at him. "Just what didn't I do?"

"You and Lacey aren't really married." He rushed the words out so quickly that they slurred together.

"You son of a—" Jimbo didn't even try to dodge the fist when he saw it coming. Cam's blow got him squarely on the chin, rocking him back on his feet.

"Get up. Get up so I can kill you." Jimbo's vision cleared enough to reveal Cam standing over him.

"No, I don't think I will. Not that I don't deserve to be killed, but I don't want my death on your conscience."

"My conscience can take the pressure. How could you do this to me? To Lacey? My God..."

Jimbo pushed himself up on one elbow. "I hadn't really thought things out. You were the ones who decided to get married. And I did try to talk you out of it. But you were both convinced it was a great idea. Well, I couldn't let you get married in that condition."

"Gee, thanks."

"So I set up a fake ceremony, got a fake certificate. But then the two of you disappeared, and the next morning you seemed upset enough about the idea of being married. I figured that finding out you weren't really married might be even worse at that point. Besides, it was obvious you were perfect for each other. So I just let things lie."

"Does Lacey know?"

"No."

Cam growled. "I wish you'd get up so I could beat you to a pulp."

Jimbo shook his head, fingering his jaw. "You don't have time to beat me up. You've got to talk to Lacey."

Jimbo was careful not to move until the car had pulled out. Cam would forgive him eventually, and Lacey wouldn't hold a grudge. He wasn't so sure about Mamie.

A low growl brought his attention to Derwent, still watching him, and bristling with hostility.

"Oh, shut up. Cam already decked me. Besides, you're too little to take me on."

Derwent promptly proved him wrong by sinking a set of very sharp little teeth into his ankle.

LACEY WAS NOT having a good day. She hadn't slept well. And then she'd awakened to morning sickness.

The shop was unusually busy for a Tuesday and it was nearly eleven before she poured herself a cup of coffee. It got cold while she helped a portly matron select a scarf to go with a particularly hideous dress.

When Cam walked in, it seemed like the perfect touch to a day that was going rapidly downhill. The last thing she wanted to deal with right now was Cam. She knew she had to tell him about the baby, but this wasn't the time or place.

"Lacey, I need to talk to you." He didn't bother with a greeting, and her uneasiness increased. He looked upset. Jimbo wouldn't have said anything, would he?

"Cam, this really isn't a very good time." She gestured to the half-dozen customers browsing behind him.

"We've got to talk right now. How about in your office?"

Lacey felt a wave of panic. He had to know about the baby. "Later." She gave him a tight smile.

"Lacey, we can talk here or we can talk in your office or we can talk on the sidewalk, but we are going to talk now. This can't wait."

"You're being obnoxious, Cam." She smiled at a woman with shockingly red hair. "Don't make a scene."

"I'm not going to. But I don't think it's unreasonable to want to talk to the woman who's carrying my child."

His final words came during a lull in the piped-in music, and they seemed to echo around the room. Lacey had only to look at the women in the shop to know that they'd heard every word.

"Let's talk about this later, Cam. Maybe over dinner tonight?" She affected a relaxed, proper tone.

His fingers tightened over her wrist. "Lacey, why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't known that long myself. I was just trying to adjust to the idea before discussing it with you."

"So you *did* plan on telling me."

"Of course I did." This time she gritted the words out, then smiled at the portly matron in the ghastly dress.

"We've got to talk about this."

"Later. Margaret won't be in until this afternoon, and I've got a business to run. Cam, please. Come back later." She was vividly aware that most of the customers had stopped even trying to pretend they weren't listening. "We can talk—"

"Lacey, we're not married."

She stared at him. She was hearing things.

"What?" she got out.

"Jimbo told me that we're not really married. The certificate was a fake. We're not married."

There was no mistaking his words this time. Cam wasn't her husband. She wasn't his wife. Her lower lip be-

gan to tremble. This whole crazy arrangement hadn't ever existed. They hadn't had a marriage at all.

Cam watched her eyes fill with tears and felt his heart crack. He pulled her closer, bending to brush a quick kiss over her mouth.

"Don't cry, honey. It's not a tragedy. We'll get married. For real this time."

She stiffened and pulled away from him. "No. I don't want you to marry me just because I'm pregnant."

He drew a deep breath. "I love you. I've been in love with you for weeks."

"You're just saying that because of the baby." She wanted to believe him. She ached to believe him.

"No, I'm not. I love you, Lacey."

"If you love me, why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was scared. I accused you of being a coward, but I was the one who was afraid."

Her eyes searched his, trying to find the truth.

"I'd believe him, honey. He looks sincere to me."

The voice came from one of the customers, a buxom and bejeweled blonde who was leaning on a rack of thoroughly risqué camisoles.

"I agree. He looks like a guy who'd tell the truth." That was the redhead.

"I don't know, you can't trust a man." This from the matron in the terrible dress.

Lacey looked up at Cam. "Are you sure?"

"I love you more than I can ever tell you. These past couple of weeks, I've been empty. I need you and I love you."

"You'll never hear a prettier speech, honey. A man who can talk like that is worth taking a chance on." The buxom blonde threw her opinion into the ring, but Lacey was listening to her own

heart, telling her to take another chance.

"It's not just because of the baby?"

"With or without the baby, Lacey, I want you in my life. I love you."

She drew a deep breath. "I love you, too."

Cam's mouth captured the last word as it left her. Lacey threw her arms around his neck, feeling his arms enfold her, holding her close, holding her safe.

The sound of applause broke them apart. Cam's arms loosened just

enough to allow her to turn and face their audience. He bowed slightly, grinning at the women. Lacey blushed but smiled. She felt as if she'd never stop smiling.

"If you'll excuse us, ladies, we have a wedding to arrange. Las Vegas?" He looked down at Lacey.

"Where else? We'll do it right this time."

"We did it right the first time," he told her. Looking into the loving blue of his eyes, she had to agree.



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STAR SIGNS



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

The hectic pace of last month may have left you a little below par. Take time out to pamper and restore your spirits—a short break away could do the trick. Your love life improves around midmonth with a surprising amount of passion.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Travel and work are both highlighted this month and could be connected. Now is the time to make the best of your contacts as you could really impress someone important. News from a close friend brings a reason to celebrate.



PISCES February 23-March 22

Many of the holdups and frustrations you have been living with for quite a while now start to vanish and you should be able to move forward in a positive manner. Loved ones also become more in tune with your wishes, making this a happy and rewarding time.



ARIES March 23-April 22

Your mood will be brighter and lighter than of late, making you more responsive to those close to you; however, take care not to repeat any gossip you hear as it could backfire on you. Finances need to be kept in check, although there are prospects for increasing your earnings.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Relationships are highlighted for you, and one in particular could be a turning point. Listen to what others have to say but follow your heart as only you know what you really want. There could be trouble with something mechanical toward the end of the month.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

The sparkle returns to your life with friends and family keeping you in great demand. There is a chance of a new romance and it could come in a very unexpected manner. Finances improve and you may feel like treating yourself to a well-earned break.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CANCER June 22-July 22

Creative pursuits are highlighted and although you may have to work long and hard to achieve what you desire, the just rewards are great. A letter brings the possibility of travel later in the year.



LEO July 23-August 22

You're feeling strong and capable but be careful not to push yourself forward too forcibly as you may put someone important into retreat. This is a good time for financial matters and if you take the trouble to put affairs in order, there could be some spare cash with which to have fun.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

Real opportunities are about to present themselves, so be prepared to be flexible in order to gain the most out of them. A surprise visitor may mean you have to put yourself out a little, but the rewards will make it worthwhile.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

A fairly hectic month could find you moving in two directions at once. Finances are well aspected, with gains coming from a surprising source. An outing toward the end of the month could prove a lot of fun and give your self-esteem a well-earned boost.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

This should be a very positive period in which success is definitely yours. Any problems or obstacles will vanish around the middle of the month, leaving you clear to achieve exactly what you want. Someone close plans a special event that brings you even closer.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

A confident and happy time allows you the space to plan for the future, knowing you can achieve more than you first thought. Children will be in the limelight and add to what should be a very pleasurable month.

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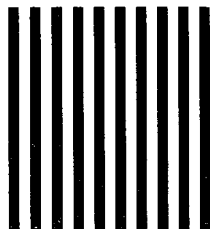
QUIET LIGHTNING • Tracy Hughes

Some radio talk-show host Nick Nemoy was! His on-the-air advice—"Divorce the schmuck!"—had Leslie's mom filing for legal separation and taking off for San Juan to catch a cruise ship. Leslie set out for the radio station, determined to give Nemoy a piece of her mind. Instead, when he wasn't there, she gave another man a piece of her heart....

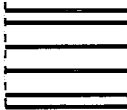
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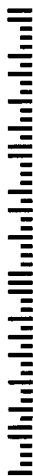
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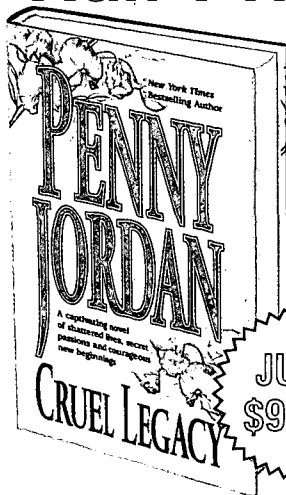


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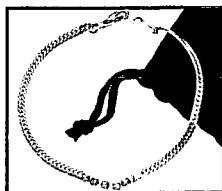
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READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #24

ACROSS

1. Scour
6. Walk in water
10. Flap
13. Slip-knot
14. Burden
15. Lateral
16. Pertaining to a bygone era
17. Encounter
18. Thought
19. Fish eggs
20. Sketch
22. Take-in
24. Wearing-away process
26. Prayer ending
27. Plus
28. Sad cry
29. "— for the Seesaw"
32. Hurl
35. Scattered rubbish
37. Detest
38. Malice
40. Sell
41. U.S. citizen
43. Red vegetables
44. Precious jewel
45. Plunge
46. Heir
47. Model
48. Break into pieces
52. Robs
55. Ogle
56. Anger
57. Verbal
58. Above
60. Appointments
62. Ascend
63. Peel
64. Precise
65. Foot digit
66. Glut
67. Depressions

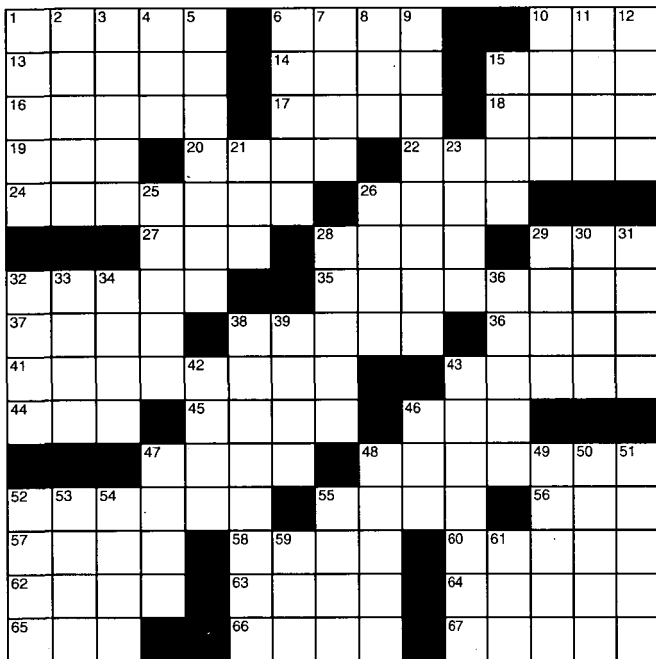
DOWN

1. Sleep noise
2. Hue
3. Cowboys' exhibition
4. Empty
5. Curving
6. Female
7. Again
8. Owed
9. Educated guess
10. Ocean current
11. Summer drinks
12. Defeat
15. Omen

21. Stick
23. Bird's home
25. More rational
26. Landed
26. Straighten
28. Lumber source
30. Departed
31. — and ends
32. Type of rug
33. Crippled
34. Object
36. Occurrence
38. Shears
39. Lay tar on
42. Adored one
43. Put up
46. That lady

47. Wan
48. Twilled fabric
49. Person of great size
50. Build
51. Takes a break
52. Classify
53. Group of three
54. Comfort
55. Period before Easter
59. By way of
61. Hatchet

Solution on page 73 of this issue.



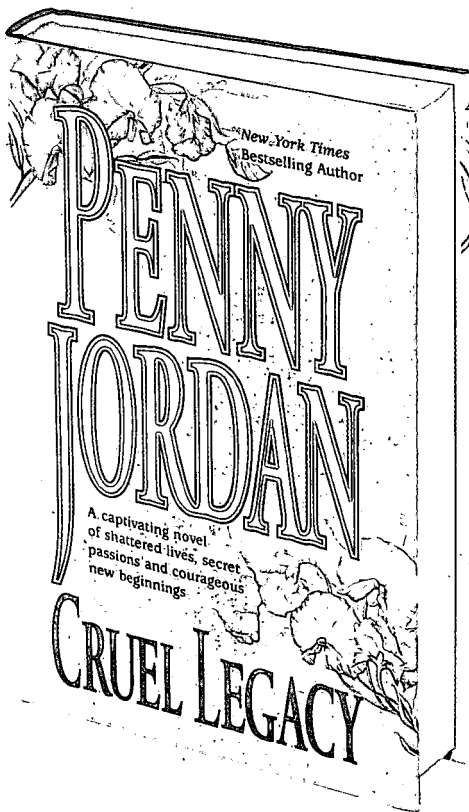
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